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GEORGI GULIA

Springtime in Saken




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1

N SAKEN . But first of all I think you ought to know where this place called Saken is. Do not look for it on the map of the world—its scale is too small for such a tiny place to be marked on it. (A circumstance which in no way troubles the inhabitants of Saken.) Should you, however, come across a map of Abkhazia, you would find Saken somewhere in the north-eastern corner.

Nature herself would seem to have chosen to keep this picturesque and certainly noteworthy village hidden away. Judge for your-

sell—in the north it is hemmed in by the steep spurs of the Caucasian range, on the east by the towering and gloomy Mount Guagua, in the west by the Klych, a waly mountain that always keeps a few snowy avalanches up its sleeve—just in case of need. Saken is boxed up, as it were. What about the south?—you will say. But from the south the way to Saken is guarded by nine passes and eight mountain rivers—each barrier more formidable than the last. Like a fairy tale, isn't it? Saken, for all that, lives and thrives!

Tourists who have been to the Caucasus are familiar with the Klukhor Pass. They also know the road which runs down to the sea. This road winds above the steep banks of the turbulent Guandra and Kodor rivers. And, when bivouacked on the spot where the Guandra flows into the Kodor, they must have breathed the honeyed scents of the mountain breeze wafted through the gorge. This breeze, should you not know it, comes from Saken.

Saken has existed for untold ages, since those days when the sea bed is said to have begun to rise, baring the stretch of land now called the Caucasus. None can tell how many

came to Saken and what brought him there. One thing only is certain—people have been living in Saken since time immemorial.

Some forty years ago a Sukhum town council official, suffering from tuberculosis, came here in search of mountain air and cheap goat's milk. He received both entirely gratis—out of hospitality. Very often this official was gloomy and sullen—at such times he was unapproachable. Sometimes he did not sleep nights, but sat writing something in a thick notebook. In conversation with people he spoke ill of the tsar and the princes—enough to make you want to stop your ears. True, he had been proud and unyielding, and was now paying for his irreconcilability. The peasants grew to like him and did what they could for him. One day this official came across a stone burial place in the mountains. The discovery led him to the conclusion that ancient man—very ancient—must have had some reason for settling here. The official told his hosts all about this and they passed it on to their neighbours. The good folk of Saken were highly pleased to learn that people had been living on their red soil so many ages.

For some reason this official—he was a clever man—began to take an interest in the greyish cliff near the village. He urged the peasants to strew dust from this cliff over their fields and gardens, but nobody followed his advice. Among his belongings, by the way (for in the spring blood gushed from his mouth and he died), was found a manuscript with the following heading *Natural Phosphorite in Saken*. This manuscript passed from hand to hand for a long time until it was finally used for cigarette paper, despite the beautiful hand in which it was written. The first page of this manuscript, however, for long adorned the wall of one of Saken's cottages, where it covered up a narrow crack in a chestnut board. The cottager's little boy had gradually learned by heart all that was written there, and the words of the morose, sick official remained firmly imprinted in his memory.

The living embodiment of Saken's history for the past century is old Shaangeri Kanba, who has rounded out six score years and ten of his existence. Throughout his long life he has been out of Saken only twice—once in search of a horse that had been stolen from him,

and the second time when he visited a neighbouring village to make a match for one of his numerous progeny. The first excursion cost him a broken arm when he and his horse fell down a ravine, the second cost him his horse crushed by an avalanche. Shaangen, after that vowed never to show his nose outside the village again. So you see, the Sakenians seldom left their mountain eyrie, and visitors from the valley were a still greater rarity.

Saken figured in the official lists of rural localities until the end of the nineties, when a new administrator, Lieutenant Stukov, was appointed to the country. This functionary, upon learning the state of affairs and hearing the opinion of the taxgatherers, who were none too eager to cross nine mountain passes and eight mountain streams in order to collect the meagre coppers of the Saken peasants, decided to expunge Saken from the list of villages as nonexistent. Luckily, this drastic act of statesmanship had no serious consequences. Saken still held its place in the cosmos, cut off from the world, half-savage, yet as proud and inaccessible as ever.

Such is the history of Saken in a nutshell.

As for present-day Saken, one has to admit outright that it is not much of a place to boast of!

If you come down to our district, you will find our villages a treat for the eye—all big and handsome and prosperous. There are more tractors these days than there are draught oxen. Trucks race along the roads so thick and fast that they almost jostle each other. Many of the collective farms have their own motor-cars. In short—they're rich. And in a district like this—Saken, if you please! Many a district committee secretary has scratched his head over it—the desire to tackle Saken was there, but how—no one for the life of him could suggest

All right, then, you may say, let's have done with Saken, why worry about it, why ^{the} worry about other villages. Saken is this and Saken is that, Saken is backward and inaccessible—what do we want with it? That's easy to say. But what if I come from there myself, if it's my own home village? There, you see, now you agree that I was right in choosing Saken for my subject. Those villages have plenty of other people to write them up and besides they're famous enough without anybody writing them up.

According to Sakenian custom, I ought to introduce myself. I was born. . . . That dratted Saken! With the first words I have to blush for it. A man's life, as everyone knows, begins with his birth. But when was I born? According to the old Sakenian calendar it works out six months after the news of the Russo-Japanese War reached Saken. To fix the beginning and the end of the war is simple enough. But when did the news reach Saken—who can say? However, there is another clue which helps to fix this all-important date. It appears that four years after my birth there was a heavy snowfall. Nineteen hundred and eleven was the year of the great snow. Now work it out—it took three years for news of the war to reach Saken and gladden the early months of my life.

Like many peasant children I began life as a shepherd and studied, as people say, from the book of nature. I did not study from real books until Soviet times, when the hairs had begun to sprout on my upper lip.

I once came to Saken in 1933, when I was within an ace of becoming a painter. People laughed there when they learned of my intend-

ed profession. But when I drew portraits of some of the villagers the laughter stopped and gave place to amazement. It turned out that a Sakenian could compete with a photographer!—this was an astounding discovery. I spent the winter and spring of 1947 again in Saken. Then it was my fellow villagers learned of my other profession (old Kanba called me a scribe and is very proud of it).

But this tale is not about me it is about the spring, about spring in Saken.

2

On the day my story begins there was bright, sunny weather in Saken. March was drawing to a close and the warm air promised an early spring. Steam was rising from the earth. A light, almost transparent haze drifted over the streams and gorges. It rose, caught by the air currents, and thickened into the beginnings of a dense layer of mist.

Over the hamlet bearing the resounding name of Silver Meadow a real, fluffy cloud formed. The hamlet stood adjacent to the almost sheer side of the mountain and the

cloud could find no way of escape. It grazed the pine tops, then broke up into fragments, only to join again in a single whole. The cloud crept steadily eastward, obedient to the air current which tried to force its way into the Saken River valley from the neighbouring gorge. Then the deep blue sky opened up, and the sun began to warm the earth.

But in the Nut Gully hamlet situated in the river valley on the outskirts of Saken, spring had come fully into its own. Only a few kilometres divided the two hamlets, yet what a difference there was between them! Here one's thoughts already began to dwell on cool springs and shady forest thickets. The peasants glanced at the earth with a business-like eye, pondering whether it was time to start work on it. Dogs lay sprawled about the yards dozing in the spring sun. The ground was green with grass, and birds whose voices had been forgotten through the winter, could be heard singing. Buds were opening on the trees. Warmth, the real flush of spring, flowed in a mighty, irresistible torrent over the earth.

But however the sun shines, be it even hotly, a mountain spring is not the best place

to rest by in the dawn of April. There was still a dampness in the air. The chill of winter, lurking deep down, like a gloomy thought in the heart, still lingered about the earth. The soil had not yet drunk in the sunshine, it merely steamed on the surface, while a quarter of a cubit below, there was still the chill of February.

Beside the spring, which was used by the inhabitants of both hamlets, sat Kesso Mirba, a young man of about thirty. He was absently whistling a stick, evidently just to while away the time. The broad-brimmed felt hat worn by mountain shepherds lay beside him, together with the thick staff which served as an aid to his wounded leg, especially on steep ascents. Kesso was wearing a khaki tunic snugly girted by a broad army belt. His rough army top boots were greased with goat's fat.

Low cliffs wreathed in creeping greenery formed a horseshoe round the spring, which was as clear and transparent as mountain air. The brook looked like molten glass, and only the shavings, now and then falling on the water, traced dozens of rings on its surface. The rings ran out in growing circles and the eyes of the young mountaineer followed them.

Here, by this spring, in another minute or so two men were about to meet who were by no means anxious to do so. They were not enemies, no, but neither could you call them good friends. They had conceived for each other a mutual dislike, the innocent cause of which was also on her way here to the spring. The trouble was that Nikuala had serious intentions regarding a girl to whom, as he thought, Kesso Mirba was paying rather pressing court. Nikuala considered that he had reached an age when it was time for him to have a pretty and charming housewife. Just when he thought his plans had ripened, this Kesso suddenly appeared upon the scene like a bolt out of the blue and upset the whole thing! Evidently the love that sprang up in the hearts of these two young people before Kesso went to the front had not cooled. The two men regarded each other with veiled jealousy. But there was also another reason, which had its roots in the more practical aspects of workaday life. Speaking without reserve, Nikuala regarded Kesso as a claimant for the post of chairman. He was afraid that this young, efficient man would ultimately become the head of the Village So-

viet—not a very pleasant prospect, since such a contretemps could only lower Nikuala in the eyes of the villagers. Kesso for his part disapproved of the way affairs were being conducted in the Village Soviet, and, apparently, had no intention of concealing the fact.

When Nikuala cautiously parted the bushes and looked down at the spring, his first impulse was to betake himself off. But it was too late—Kesso had seen him. There was nothing left to do but climb down and greet him with a casual air—baring his teeth in a grin, as Sakenians put it. Kesso, too, did not feel any particular delight as he greeted Nikuala in his turn.

“The heat’s broiling!” said Nikuala, speaking with a slight burr.

He was a thickset man of middle age. His face had begun to put on fat, and a pair of restless eyes darted about in their narrow slits. But a broad smile that displayed two rows of even white teeth lent his face a good-humoured expression.

Nikuala moistened a huge handkerchief in the water and wiped his face and neck.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

winking as though he had caught Kesso out in something. Then, with a sly glance round the hollow in which the spring lay, he added mysteriously "I understand. ."

Nikuala broke into a forced laugh. He wrung out the handkerchief, dipped it into the water again and began to rinse it—just for something to do.

"Just sitting. Whittling," Kesso replied coldly, tossing the stick aside.

"You think I can't see that?" Nikuala smiled, looking into the water, while the corners of his mouth twitched up and down.

Kesso watched him playing with the water—this man who was always so gay, always unconcerned to an extent that was beginning to tire those about him. He was irritated by those healthy, ruddy cheeks, that almost youthful vivacity of Nikuala, who in Kesso's opinion was a thoroughgoing idler. That bright colour in Nikuala's cheeks, by the way, faded swiftly when he was in the chairman's seat at the Village Soviet. Within the four walls of his office he became somber and self-important, sparing in word and movement. It may be that at the bottom of his heart he felt that a real

hunter had no business at an office desk—and, to do him justice, Nikuala was certainly a very good hunter. But as far as administrative work was concerned, he sought only one thing—that nobody should bother him. “Peace and order,” Nikuala would say when people came to him with questions concerning village affairs. Perhaps he was merely lazy, or perhaps he just felt himself a square peg in a round hole?—such things happen! It’s not everybody who fits the chairman’s seat!

“What is Saken?” he would sometimes ask himself, and supply the answer. “A patch of reddish soil lost in the mountains. No better than a bear’s den. . . . It may be that this was the root cause of that pessimism, the outward signs of which were so often observed by visitors to the Village Soviet: the flabby face of the chairman, the broken windowpanes, the squeaky and dilapidated doors. . . .

As Nikuala used to say, he had smelt powder in his time too. For two years he had been at the front, never laying down his sniper’s rifle. The butt was dented with little crosses testifying to the military prowess of the man who had cuddled it to his cheek. . . . Then

came the end of the war. Nikuala returned home and fell plump into the Village Soviet 'Fascinated them by my decorations,' Nikuala admitted frankly, stirring uneasily in his chairman's seat. To tell the truth, it was only the forest and its inhabitants that afforded him any real pleasure—he was a born hunter. And if he was still filling the post of chairman and the villagers took no drastic action against him, it was thanks to the fact that there were other people of a different calibre working with him. They it was who steered the affairs of the village and carried the chairman forward with them.

Nikuala's indifference exasperated many, among them Kesso. But if he was ever called to account, he always managed to justify himself. In a word, he contrived for the time being to muddle along.

For nothing better to talk about, Kesso aired his opinions on hunting prospects.

"Ought to be good hunting just now," he remarked.

"Good hunting?" Nikuala whistled. "Don't you see where the eagles are flying? No, nothing doing in the forest just now . . ."

Nikuala lay down on the grass and clasped his hands behind his head. Talk would not flow. Kesso glanced at his large wrist watch—a souvenir of the front.

“In a hurry?” asked Nikuala “Or waiting for somebody?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Was I right?” The slits of eyes surveyed Kesso mockingly.

This interrogation irritated the young man. He rose suddenly and tightened his belt.

“Listen,” said Nikuala, ‘maybe you’re waiting for a girl? . . If so, I’ll go . . .’

Kesso flushed. Because the hint had struck the mark he tried to assume an air of righteous indignation.

“All right, I was only joking . . .” Nikuala slapped his handkerchief against the water. “What can you do, Kesso? We’re all human . . .”

But why was he looking so meaningfully at Kesso? Why didn’t he take himself off? ..

The rosy glow which had warmed Kesso since the morning gave place to a shadow black as a thundercloud, and the young man’s

heart showed notice of the change with loud, quick thuds

"Anybody may take it into their head to come here!" growled Kesso "You can't forbid people to come for water."

"You can't forbid it! You can't forbid it!" hummed Nikuala and laughed. Then, wringing out his handkerchief, he added "Well' I'll be off.. "

At this moment, however, there was a stir among the bushes and a gull began descending to the spring.

Kama (for this was her name) stopped short at the unexpected sight like a startled chamois (an original simile in vogue among Sakenian narrators) She was embarrassed at finding not one, but two men in army tunics. But in Saken, as in all other parts of the globe, girls possess great skill in dissembling

So now Kama slowly descended to the very edge of the water, feeling upon herself the converging gaze of two pairs of eyes. With a careless movement she straightened the bright kerchief on her head and shifted the clay pitcher to hold it more conveniently. Her eyes were cast down, her lids modestly lowered.

Some inner voice was telling Kama "Stop!" This was undoubtedly a premonition of danger. Danger seemed to be lurking in the very place, over which hovered the memories of sanguinary encounters—for the spring had long served as a trysting place for lovers, and had often also been the arena of duels (there has never been a dearth of jealous men in Saken).

Kesso stood there scowling. Nikuala wore an ironic grin—all this led the girl to think the two men had been quarrelling.

"What do you say to that?" cried Nikuala. 'Just as though it had been planned!'

"What if it had?" said the girl mischievously, tossing her head prettily and displaying her snow-white teeth.

Kesso assumed an air of nonchalance.

"Nikuala thinks that we've arranged to meet here," he said.

"What if we have?" Kama deftly threw her plait over her back. "Surely nobody could be ashamed to meet me."

"Kesso seems to think otherwise," muttered Nikuala.

"I? Why otherwise?"

"I don't know." Nikuala tucked his hand-

kerchief into the huge pocket of his trousers
"Ah, youth, youth! I can see that you're both
flustered. Well, Kesso—jokes are all right, but
business is business. Come to the Soviet tomorrow,
I've got something serious to talk to you
about. Spring's at the door, understand?"

He ran up the hillock, then, before disappearing, repeated significantly

'You understand—spring!'

With that he dived into the brush like a swimmer into the water

* 3 *

Kesso and Kama were as though left alone in a room where the door had been politely but firmly shut. As often happens in such cases, they could not at once collect their thoughts.

Kama placed the pitcher on the ground and began cleaning its soot-blackened sides with sand.

Kesso traced fanciful figures in the sand with a stick.

"How embarrassed you were," said Kama, without looking at him

"I?" .

"You."

"Why should I be embarrassed?"

"I don't know Maybe you're ashamed of me?"

"Kama!" Kesso took a step towards her

"Don't come near," she warned him quickly. "He might be peeping"

Kesso looked sulky. Kama began to feel sorry for him. She sat down beside him and took his big hand in hers.

"What are you thinking of?"

She stroked his hand and looked into his eyes. He could see the mischievous pupils quite close, but he was unable to respond to her tenderness.

"He likes you," he forced out at last .

Kama flung her arms round his neck. Her lips touching his ear, she whispered:

"But I love you . . ."

Kesso continued stubbornly

"It's clear, he's in love. . . ."

"Everybody has a right to fall in love. . ."

"Maybe he's got some grounds for hoping?"

"Silly boy," the girl whispered, nestling tenderly to her sweetheart. "Let's forget about

him!" To herself she thought merrily. "He's as jealous as the devil!"

The "devil" meanwhile sat scowling, aware that he was cutting a sorry figure. But how was he to get out of the awkward situation without loss of his masculine dignity?

Time was when the men of Saken had been famed in the mountains for their fierce jealousies, the women being considered meek and docile. But much water had flowed under the bridge since those days, and Saken had acquired a school, a teacher, doctor and veterinary had appeared. Now and then the newspapers would find their way in. And so, imperceptibly as it were, the Sakenian character began to undergo a subtle change. The Sakenians noticed to their amazement that the men were trying to please their sweethearts, and the women had become more critical and acquired their own views on marriage questions. The men of Saken involuntarily began to show more tolerance to their rivals. Those who considered themselves of old Sakenian stock, rooted like an oak in Saken soil, were amazed to note the change in views and everyday habits.

Sometimes a man would declare himself the guardian of tradition, and, assuming a belligerent attitude, attempt to uphold the customs of his forbears. But he invariably came to grief and was left looking foolish, for he was marching on with giant strides. For all this, there were traits of character in some of the Sakenians which yielded to change with great difficulty. Why go far? Here was Kesso, proud and stubborn. He was in the wrong, he knew it perfectly well, but he would not admit it. . . . So Kesso pretended that his wounded leg was aching.

"Is it hurting?" asked Kama.

He grimaced

"It doesn't hurt, it just aches."

The girl picked up her pitcher and began painstakingly cleaning it again, talking to Kesso all the time.

"Whether it hurts or aches, it's all the same. The leg needs treatment. It's kept you on your back all the winter and it'll go on hurting."

"I won't go to that doctor of yours," said Kesso. "A lot he understands! He's just good at drinking. What a doctor we had in

the army! A professor, not just a doctor! It's true he liked to drink too—can't say that he didn't. But what a brain! What a clever man!"

"And where's this clever man now? A regular drunkard, probably."

"No, a shell got him. Near Lvov."

They both fell silent.

"Get your leg attended to," said Kama, worried. "You'll be a cripple."

"Will you stop loving me?"

"I can't stand stubborn people." She dipped the pitcher into the water and a loud bubbling sound came from it. "Get your leg attended to. You heard what the chairman said. Spring's at the door!"

Kesso stretched with enjoyment, like a cat in the sunshine.

"I was the first to notice the spring, not you, chairman. . . I've got something in store for spring that'll make you gasp!"

The girl's heart throbbed. What was the boy hinting at?

"Gasp? Me? Are you planning to invent gunpowder?" she asked, trying to conceal her curiosity.

The young man raised aloft a twig which he had just snapped off and tossed it into the bushes.

"Why gunpowder, when there's a stronger explosive," he said gravely. "Our business is with soil."

"You mean this?" Kama threw a handful of yellow sand at Kesso's feet.

"And isn't that soil? You can get homesick even for that! You know the song:

I left the land,
I left the land,
Parted with it forever

But the dewy dawn,
Ah, the dewy dawn,
I returned to it forever"

Kesso sang a verse or two, quaintly out of tune. Then suddenly breaking off, he asked abruptly:

"Kama, would you like to see a miracle?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. What did he mean?

"Didn't you once say that miracles don't happen? And they taught us the same at school."

Kesso made an impatient gesture

"Answer my question."

"What are you going to do?"

"I?" Kesso stood with his feet wide apart, arms akimbo. "Listen. The chairman has a lot to say about spring, but I've got something up my sleeve. . . What would you say to five hundred poods of maize to the hectare?"

"Oh, that's what you're talking about," said the girl, disappointed. "What's the use of talking about five hundred when we cannot even manage as much as a hundred?"

"That's where the miracle comes in."

"I can't waste my time with you chattering about miracles."

Was he laughing at her, or what?

But Kesso was speaking very earnestly, as though he were recalling something that had happened a long, long time ago.

"Do you remember. . . No, how could you? . . . You're too young. . . They say a man once lived here in the old days, a sick official. He died. I remember what he wrote on a sheet of paper. It was pasted up on the wall by my bed. He wrote about the cliff. You know the

Mersey Cliff? Just behind our house Before I went to the front people were talking about it here in Saken. Well, wait and see. . ."

Kama lifted the pitcher and Kesso could see that it was heavy for her But she pushed his proffered hand aside.

"I'll carry it myself," she said, and turned towards the path. "And don't follow me—somebody'll see Goodbye."

Kesso returned to the spring. He could hear the sand falling under Kama's feet, he saw her kerchief fluttering among the bushes. And then Kesso was alone once more Deep in thought, he gazed into the water which reflected his swarthy, preoccupied face with the deep fold between the brows and the compressed lips. It was as though he were seeking an answer to his thoughts somewhere in the depths of the water sparkling in the sunshine.

4

That same day a man was seen walking along the road that led to the centre of the village His appearance was such as could not fail to attract attention. He was dressed in a

wadded waistcoat and army breeches, and had contrived to wind his army greatcoat about his head in the form of a Caucasian hood. He wore a pair of massive boots, obviously several sizes too large. His breeches were heavily caked with mud, and those same boots appeared to be full of water—they squelched at every step, and their owner now and then cast contemptuous glances at them

To right and left ran weatherworn fences. Nearby, next to the roadside, a small building came into view. To this the traveller bent his steps

Approaching the building (it was the village cooperative shop) the stranger struck up a gay song

Whose is this street,
And whose is this house?

He sang pretty loudly and his voice carried into the shop. It was not often that this old song was heard in Saken, and it immediately attracted attention. Several men emerged with flushed faces.

"What's that turban he's got on his head?" one of them asked.

"Looks as though he's dropped from the skies," remarked another.

Adamur, the manager of the shop, an enormously fat man almost as round as a ball, scratched his third chin (counting from top to bottom) and withheld his opinion for the time being. His surprise vented itself in stertorous breathing, while his brows flew right up to the beginning of his bald pate, and his moustache—an object of particular pride—fairly bristled. The traveller approached, still singing, neither quickening nor slackening his pace.

"The first swallow from the plains," said Adamur.

"That means the road's open."

"We'll soon find out."

The traveller made straight for the shop, without troubling to avoid a large pool.

"Long live the Sakenians!" he greeted them hoisterously. "Company—attention! *Hände hoch!*"

The Sakenians were thoroughly nonplussed.

"At ease, I tell you," the traveller continued, and with a jerk of his head flung the

greatcoat to the ground. The next minute Adamur was the recipient of a friendly punch in the belly. This original mode of salutation instantly revealed the stranger's identity. It was Rashit Dowa, who had long been given up as killed in the war.

"Rashit!" all cried out in a single impulse, and the newcomer was embraced all round by his old friends. Then he was unceremoniously turned about and examined from all sides, until the reality of this extraordinary personage was established beyond all doubt.

Rashit had hardly changed in the six years of his absence. True, his face had darkened and grown haggard, which made his nose, always remarkable for its length (an eagle's beak) seem even longer and more hooked. Across his forehead ran a huge, rough scar—the mark of a long-healed gash.

Rashit was first jostled into the shop, then behind a sort of partition, and finally found himself sitting astride a barrel. The rest poured in after him and the whole company settled down comfortably among the barrels and empty boxes.

"All alive and well?" Rashit asked for the sake of politeness, his eyes roaming among the bottles standing on the floor. "Saken still in the same place?"

"Would you believe it—hasn't moved an inch!"

"Splendid. And how's the garrison?"

"Scratching the soil"

This information was evidently considered exhaustive, for he asked no more questions. Seizing the opportunity, Adamur filled a glass with red wine.

"Anton," he said addressing a small non-descript-looking man with inflamed eyelids. "Drink to our guest . . ."

The glass went all round, and the guest drank from it three times.

"Well, and where have you been, Rashit? What have you been doing?"

Rashit, munching a bannock, gave a laconic but vivid account of his recent years

"After that row" (meaning the free fight during a spree which had not ended too happily for Rashit—hence the scar) "I made tracks for town. I worked in a place there, learned bootmaking. Then came the war. . . The

front . . The Carpathians—you know 'em?
Been everywhere, smelt powder, as they say. . .
Hande hoch!"

"Well, thank God you've come back!"
Adamur filled the glass. "We've missed you,
thought you'd gone under And the girls miss
you—fact! Won't they be glad. The eagle's
come back!"

The man named Anton mumbled two or
three incoherent phrases and tossed off his
glass in a single gulp

"All my friends alive and well?"

"Who do you want to know about?" Ada-
mur stooped and fished a pickled cucumber
out of a clay pot. He licked his fingers and
smacked his lips

"Nikuala?"

"Alive, to the sorrow of all wild beasts....
Boss of the Village Soviet."

"Shaangeri?"

"Won't hear of dying for another ten
years "

"Oho! Isn't a century and a half too much
for one man?"

"He doesn't think so."

"So. And old Mirba?"

"He s here."

"His daughter?"

"As lively as a canary."

"That . Kesso?"

"Came back. . . Been laid up all winter, something wrong with his leg. . . Came back with a swelled head, too "

The glass was passed around.

' Swelled head? "

"Yes, and how! Criticizes everything! . . Gives himself ans . . Our soil, you see, isn't to his liking The yield is too small, he says. . In short, thinks he's a smart fellow "

"Seen plenty of that sort! . . What about the schoolteachers?"

"Got more of 'em "

"The doctor?"

"A new one . Do anything for a friend. . ."

"Fine! . . And Tarash, I hope he's all right? "

"I don't know about that ' Adamur broke off a huge chunk of bannock and thrust it into his mouth He said nothing until he had chewed and swallowed it. "I don't know. For the last few years he was collective farm chair-

man. Did fine. Then he fell ill—consumption . . . Last summer they sent him. . . .”

“Who sent him?”

“Who? Why, the collective farm . . . Now, what’s the name of that place?—yes, they sent him to Gulripsh.”

“At whose expense? Did the farm give the money, or what?”

“They say he’s the right sort, and for the right sort money can always be found. That’s the rule, brother. . . . Before the war, if you remember, they sent a lot of people to health resorts, or to study, to attend some kind of courses. And all at the farm’s expense. Now they say that as soon as we get on our feet after the war we’ll be sending them again. Solicitude, you know, as the saying goes.” And winking at Anton, Adamur wiped his moustache with his sleeve.

“So you’re without a head, without a chairman . . . Who’s taking his place?”

Anton spoke up:

“Konstantin, for the time.”

“Konstantin, Konstantin . . .” Rasht flogged his memory.

“Why, the leader of the third farm team!

A member of the collective farm board, our Party secretary."

"I begin to remember," growled Rashit, who did not like to think of people who had at any time or in any way stepped on his corns. "Well, and that—Saluman—the smith?"

Adamur wiped his hands on a rag Anton stopped chewing. The silence was general.

"Killed," said Adamur. "Killed near Rostov."

"Yes . . . A pity. . . He was a good fellow. Well, peace to his ashes, as they say . . ."

The men drank in silence.

"Who else didn't come back?" Rashit asked gloomily.

"The brothers Hashim and Said," Adamur replied. "The teacher David Alan . . . Mikhail Ranba, and his cousin Gach. . ."

Rashit interrupted him.

"Yes, my friends," he said, holding out his glass to be filled. "The Sakenians have been hard hit too. Where are their bones rotting now? . . ." Rashit's brow gathered in deep folds, he pressed his lips together, then, drumming on the barrel, he continued: "In short, trouble

hasn't passed us by either. We've been hit too. But you ought to see what it's like out *there*," he jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Whole towns wiped off the face of the earth. . . And how many people left homeless, our own people. . . ."

Silence reigned in the little room. All were lost in thought.

Anton put down his glass, pushed away the bottle and sighed loudly. Rashit stared before him, and the others sat with heads lowered. Adamur felt it his duty as host to cheer up the guests.

"Oh, hell!" he cried. "Well, now we've got one fine lad more. We'll be having a wedding here soon!"

The whole company guffawed, to Rashit's confusion.

"Too early yet," he said. "I'll fix myself up with a job . . . and then. . . ."

Adamur gave him no time to finish.

"The main thing, Rashit, is that you're alive and well! What more could a man want? The village has been dull without you—no real men, nothing doing worthy of the bright sparks of Saken!"

Rashit jumped off the barrel.

"Well, we'll change all that now, Adamur! Here's my mind . ." Rashit brought his fist down on the barrel with a thud "It's this way I'm a mountaineer. . . All of us. . . That means my blood's—well, fizzling like wine, say? . Eh? We've got our own laws, our ancient customs, too. Now, brother, remember—you're a man Isn't that so? There'll be great doings, Adamur, I swear it by my grandsires' ashes! Anybody object? All—in favour!"

He swayed and nearly spilled the wine

5

It was a marvellously clear morning, cloudless as though a glass dome covering the world had been wiped clean. The sky was evenly blue, with only a fringe of pale pink. Large dewdrops sparkled on the grass The smoke rose straight upwards, in sharp spual columns. Everything promised fair days to come.

Kesso stood in the middle of the spacious yard as though listening to something. Cows were mooing, dogs barking, and a lonely kestrel

circled in the sky, the first to be about his business of hunting.

Kesso's father, Yekup, descended the steps, grunting. He was a lean man, somewhat shorter than his son, stooped at the waist. Large blue eyes shone out strangely in his sharp-featured face, the typical face of a mountaineer. He wore a short beard and moustache which drooped down over his lips. Life had not treated Yekup gently in his youth; in fact, it had been rather harsh and had aged him before his time. Though frequently ill, he was nevertheless a hard worker. Now, however, his strength was obviously failing, and he was only in his fifties!

Fifty years back the Mirba clan had reckoned an impressive number of persons of both sexes. It was respected, and possibly feared. Karaman Mirba, Yekup's brother, had been famous for his daring. He would cross the Caucasian range and come back driving cattle which he had neither purchased nor received as a gift.

Yekup's uncles had been energetic, determined men. But the Marshan princes, who ruled Saken, had made it their business to see

that the dangerous Mirba brothers, who as a united body might seriously undermine the princely influence, should do their best to kill each other off in fratricidal feuds. There is truth in the old saying: "A snake may be caught with the hand of a fool."

Yekup survived the clan feuds by sheer accident. His maternal grandmother took him away, and with her he grew up to manhood. When the passions in Saken had somewhat cooled, he returned to his father's house, or rather, to its ruins. He had to begin life anew and taste all the bitterness of the peasant's unenviable lot. The maize usually lasted only till April, and after that he lived, as they say, trusting in God—barely keeping body and soul together. During his absence the allotment that had belonged to his father had shrunk considerably in favour of Adamur—his neighbour and distant relative. Besides, the soil was so poor that there could be no hope of a more or less secure life.

But Yekup was not fated to drink the bitter cup to the end of his life—fortune smiled on him. It must have been a propitious hour when his old mother blessed him on her death-

bed Yekup was stunned when a sizable tract of land was assigned to him and he was told that the Revolution had given it to him "Where is it, this Revolution?" he had asked "It's here already," men from the town had told him. Yes, my friends, Yekup was made happy then, like many other mountaineers

When the Sakemans said that it would be a good thing to organize a collective farm (that was ten years ago), and when Yekup grasped the idea of it—an idea which has come to be so near and dear to every peasant, he declared "I want to be a collective farmer That's all " And he told his neighbours. "You remember the sky yesterday—heavy clouds, all overcast? That was my life in the past . . And now do you see that great blue sky? That is my life today." He often used to repeat these words, which summed up his deepest feelings.

. . Yekup was now pottering about his yard leaning on a stick, his old Circassian coat hanging from his shoulders as though it didn't belong to him Kesso stood watching him. In the person of his father he visualized the hard life of the peasants during the war. When Kesso was at the front, Yekup was the

only man left in the house "No, he can't go on working any more .. It's a shame!" thought Kesso Catching his son's compassionate glance, the old man assumed a brisk air.

"We'll settle everything now," he said, beckoning to Kesso to follow him. "There's this fence—falling to pieces, all rotten! And the posts up to that ditch have rotted too. But they'll hold for the present I reckon we'll need five cartloads of faggots, the very least. A yard without a fence is like an empty field. Isn't that so?"

Kesso leisurely followed his father, taking in everything with the keen eye of a husbandman. His first winter home from the front had come to an end. Spring was here bringing increased cares. The snow had melted, laying everything bare to the eye, and there was much that gave it no pleasure to see. There was plenty to be done, but where to start?

"The gate—if you can call it a gate. Open it and you'll have a hard job to shut it again ... A disgrace! And the little bridge over the ditch—like God's curse. If the horse lost its footing you wouldn't get it out for no money, not if you used bullocks to drag it. ...

But don't lose heart, Kesso. Let's see what else there is . . ."

After completing the round of the yard, they made for the house. The old man pointed out every defect as though delighted at the discovery, rapping fiercely on the boards with his stick, poking out the rot. But Kesso was thinking, trying to dig to the root of things. No, the chief trouble was not the rotting fence or the broken gate, it was the soil, the poverty of the soil.

"Some house, God forgive us," said Yekup. "The steps have had their day, and the walls are nothing but rot. That beam needs changing, or it may come down on someone's head. We need a new roof, but to get shingles is no easy job. Not less than a hundred chestnut boards and three cartloads of shingles. . ."

Yekup seated himself on the step and lighted his pipe. Then he continued.

"The cowhouse is tottering. A good farmer wouldn't keep a dog there, let alone a cow. Enough to make you weep."

"Now, now, Father . . ."

"Well, what d'ye think? It's not a laughing matter." Yekup lowered his voice. "Your

sister's not a child any longer, we've got to think about her. Before we know it she'll be getting married. We've got our hands full."

"Why, has she any suitors?"

"Suitors be damned! Beating about the bush, sizing us up, us and our property. You've hardly been home yet, one might say—it's not your fault. Your leg's only just getting right. But you wait—you'll see things for yourself. . . Here's spring now, and just as if for spite they've given your team the worst plot—weeds wouldn't grow on it, and they want maize. So there you are! I turned it down flat, told the whole administration. You mark my words—our farm group won't lift a finger on that field, curse it! I'm telling you as team leader. . . "

Yekup was thoroughly worked up. He unfastened the collar of his shirt as though it choked him.

Kesso laid his hand on the old man's shoulder and tried to calm him.

Yekup refilled his pipe and struck a light with his flint and steel.

"And what you are thinking of, Kesso, I don't know! It's all very well to talk about the

war, but it's time we started living decently. Why shouldn't you speak to the Village Soviet, or whoever it is, and ask them to help us out? Doesn't it mean something that you've come back with medals, and fought for your country? You've been sick all the winter. Get them to do our repairs and give us a better plot, as we're entitled to."

Kesso shouted to drive away the kestrel circling over the yard, and sat down beside his father.

"I'm not going to ask for any help. I'm not a cripple."

"It's pride that's wrong with you, more than your leg!"

"All my limbs are whole, thank heaven. The fence, the house, the cowhouse—that can wait, they won't run away. But the land and the tillage—that's another matter. We've got to begin with that, that's the main thing."

"Meanwhile we're to live under the open sky, I suppose?"

Kesso answered calmly, choosing his words.

"Listen, Father—the ploughing comes first. . . ."

"What are you going to plough on—your own head?"

"... The ploughing comes first. All the land around Saken's not worth a straw! Yellow soil, red soil.... The sections by the river aren't enough for everyone, somebody's got to work the hillsides too."

"But why us?"

"But why other people?"

"You've been at the front, and were your family!"

A frown of displeasure crinkled Kesso's brow.

"We're not going to ask for any handouts, Father. I'm not a wounded Tommy gunner now, but a healthy team leader."

A girl in a close-fitting gingham frock with rolled-up sleeves peeped out of the kitchen. She could hardly be called pretty, but there was something attractive about her—some said it was her pleasant ways, others her blue eyes, which were like her father's. The boys cast sheep's eyes at her, the neighbours vied in praising her, and they all had good reason.

"Come here, Nina," said the old man, "listen to what your brother's saying. He doesn't

give a damn for the house, or anything. All he cares about is the ploughing. . . Just the kind of talk you might expect from our chairman. . . ."

Nina looked curiously at her father and her brother, as though listening to an argument between people who had nothing to do with her. She did not have the temerity to interrupt them, and supported neither one nor the other.

Kesso paced up and down several times in silence, then suddenly asked:

"Don't you want to get rich?"

Father and daughter exchanged puzzled glances.

"Yes, there's nothing to be so surprised about—rich, I said! And how? Very simple." Kesso turned sharply round. "Father, you know the Mercy Cliff?"

The old man looked dumbfounded for a moment, then exclaimed:

"I know it, damn it! What's that daft cliff got to do with it?"

"And what do you know about it?"

The old man snorted. Was his son laughing at him?

"Well?" he growled "There is a cliff of that name. Right here, close by. What else d'ye want to know?"

Kesso beckoned to Nina, then said slowly and solemnly.

"We're going to turn Mercy Cliff into Fertility Cliff You hear that, Father? But joking apart," he continued earnestly, "you remember what people used to talk about just before the war? Eh? They talked about that cliff, didn't they? Well, I was thinking about it all the time, out there in the trenches! And I thought it out. It's not my fault the war hindered it . "

"The war hindered it," the old man echoed, knitting his brows "I know our folks wanted that cliff I remember once long ago there was an official staying here, sick he was . . He'd got a lot of ideas, too And you're just the same, God help us!"

"Don't worry, Father," cried Kesso "You wait, only let the spring come!"

And the sun, the April sun, as though wishing to know who so passionately longed for the spring, peeped out with curiosity upon the earth. And people noted with satisfaction that the sun was brighter and warmer, a real spring sun.

At breakfast Nina kept up a quick patter of talk about her team's work with the tobacco seedlings. According to her, everything was going splendidly. She ate quickly, every now and then tossing back the hair that fell onto her forehead.

Yekup ate in silence, occasionally putting brief, unimportant questions to his daughter.

Kesso's thoughts were far away. He did not hear half of Nina's chatter. When his sister proudly declared that the seedlings would be excellent, he interrupted her to ask for water. Nina broke off in the middle of a sentence and bent over her plate. This indifference to her work on the part of her brother, whom she considered an important man in the village, hurt the girl. The father shook his head and smiled at her in sympathy. He loved his daughter for her good nature, and her solicitude for him touched his heart. The old man could have listened to her talk about the tobacco seedlings and hotbeds all day.

Nina rose. Kesso's absent glance passed over her, and he too rose. The day he had

planned was not going to be an easy one. He had to see all the farm group leaders, find out what they were thinking with regard to the team's work, and buck them up. A good commander always does that before an attack. Then there was to be a serious talk with the collective farm administration and the Village Soviet, a talk fraught perhaps with some unpleasantness.

"Well, I'll be off," said Kesso, and, jamming his cap down over his brows, he went out.

The first person the team leader visited was Anton Rashba, whose acquaintance we have already made in Adamui's shop.

Anton was chopping wood. He swung the heavy axe so awkwardly that he nearly fell his length, balancing himself with difficulty on his crooked, spindly legs. Kesso called to him. Anton cupped his hand over his eyes.

"Come in," he said, throwing the axe aside.

"Thanks, but I'm in a hurry." Kesso glanced at his watch to give weight to the words. "You've become a regular woodcutter."

Anton began coughing and hobbled towards the fence.

"And I was saying to myself just now ' he began, coughing after almost every other word, "where's our team leader got to? Well, not bored yet with a peaceful life?"

"Why bored? We've done our bit of fighting, that's finished with now "

"You're right . " Anton rubbed his eyes with his fist till they got red. "Come in and have a glass of wine "

Kesso thanked him, but declined

"How are affairs going?"

"What affairs?" asked Anton in surprise.

"Farming affairs, of course."

"Ah, affairs!" Anton drawled. "Everything's as it should be "

, "I see Don't you think of starting ploughing?"

Anton showed his teeth in a grimace that was intended to represent a good-humoured smile.

"Ploughing? What's the hurry? Now, in the old times, you know..."

Kesso surveyed the heavens and, without listening to Anton, impressed upon him that the next morning the whole farm group was to turn out for work Anton tried to protest that it was too early in the season, that the

snow hadn't melted properly yet, but Kesso waived all his objections.

"Tomorrow at seven sharp—on the field!" he said

"I can't," Anton replied "I've got a twinge in my leg Don't you believe me?" He grinned "Really, it's true Suddenly my big toe'll start to ache, and then before I've time to turn round there's a shooting in my little toe, and a seizure in all the joints. The pain jumps all over the place like a flea. You understand?"

"I don't" And Kesso strode off, leaving Anton to go on talking to himself as long as he pleased (an occupation not particularly popular among Saken folk)

"Can't expect anything from a good-for-nothing like that," mused Kesso as he walked on "But people differ. There's good people and bad people everywhere. And you've got to work with them all. It's difficult, but it can't be helped What's to be done? Drag the laggards along, make them work properly. . "

Kesso clenched his fists furiously He was ready to use them on anyone who dared to

make a jest of spring "Have to teach that idiot a lesson," he told himself, cursing Anton roundly. But his talks with other group leaders heartened him somewhat, and cheered him up. This was in no little measure also due to the weather and the magnificent sunshine. You have to remember that a gloomy Sakeman on a bright day is a rare phenomenon. Small troubles seem but a flea-bite, and big ones not at all formidable to him on such a day as this. Kesso was already exchanging jests with people he chanced to meet. He bowed to the women with stressed politeness and brought the colour into the girls' cheeks with his compliments.

Kesso was whistling a tune. He did not go around the large puddles but jumped over them (there are many puddles in Saken—take my word for it), and every jump was accompanied by an exultant cry.

Out on the dirt road (as if Saken had others), the mud became menacingly deep. Here the puddles were in no wise made more attractive by their bright reflections of the spring sun. There were as many suns as there were puddles! And Kesso sprinted over a

whole row of dazzling planets. Involuntarily he recalled the oozy spring roads of the Ukraine and Poland, where even Studebakers had got stuck. The living voice of his friend (a flaxen-haired young Tommy gunner from Yaroslavl) rang in his ears. "Hey, fellas, pull up your boots—the mud is deep!" He recalled the voice—and slackened his pace. That lad had been buried in Polish soil, and the man from Saken who had shared with him all the vicissitudes of marching life had shed a tear over his grave. That had been three years ago. Had that mound been preserved as the memory of army friends had been preserved in Kesso's heart, cherished and brought to the Caucasus Mountains, or had the driving winds levelled the earth and swept away all trace of the lonely grave? . . .

7

The walk to the Village Soviet seemed interminable. It was already the second half of the day, long past the time Kesso had selected for the talk at the Soviet. At the crossroad

Kesso hesitated. What should he do—go straight to the Soviet, or turn off to Gudal's, the leader of his third farm group?

Just at this moment a cart emerged from behind a sharp bend in the road. It was slowly drawn by two elephantine bullocks. The sluggishness of these animals is generally known, but the Saken species seems to have been intentionally created to annoy the hot-headed mountaineers.

The cart had barely come into view when a volley of oaths fell on the heads of the animals, and a willow switch lashed them furiously.

"Hey you, wolves' feed! Devil's offspring!" the driver yelled, whipping the bullocks violently. Finally losing all patience, he jumped to the ground and angrily began rolling up his sleeves, threatening the animals with extraordinary measures.

"What's the matter, Gudal?"

The driver gaped at Kesso, who seemed to have sprung out of the ground.

"Where did you come from?" he asked, glancing angrily at his foes; he evidently intended to punish the bullocks as soon as he had

finished his conversation "Drop out of the sky, or what?"

He gesticulated expressively as he spoke, raising his voice almost to a scream. Gudal was a man well on in years (about fifty), keen-willed, energetic and as hardworking as any of the younger men.

Kesso, his hands folded behind his back, laughed.

"Don't kill them, you'll be sorry."

"I? Sorry?" screamed Gudal, still angry at his bullocks. The beasts, puffing, drew towards a clump of dewberry bushes. "You don't know me well enough, my friend. What I think, I do, that's my way. To be sure. But these lazy bullocks will drive me mad."

And Gudal again began lashing them with his switch. With difficulty Kesso dragged him away from the animals and offered him a cigarette. In no time they were chatting as though nothing had happened. Gudal's anger disappeared together with the grey cigarette smoke.

"I'm taking a thing home," said Gudal. "It's called—wait a minute—what does a ship have?"

"A ship?"

"Well, you know... " Gudal wiped his brow, trying to remember what it was that ships had.

"A funnel?" Kesso suggested.

"No, no, not a funnel."

"Ropes?"

"Of all things!"

"A flag, maybe?"

"You're a flag yourself! Fie on you! Take a look, maybe you know what it is. . . My son brought this thing from town last summer And not only this one . I'm coming from the blacksmith's . ."

They climbed into the cart A sort of shaft with wire coiled around it lay in a box lined with straw.

"Looks like a dynamo," said Kesso.

"No, that's not it. It's called..." Gudal hesitated. "Well, what's there on ships? Come with me, my son will tell you all about it. Do you understand—it cost five hundred rubles. But the money doesn't matter! Think of all the work! Just try and lug it over the passes and precipices!"

Kesso scratched his head and pulled at his ear (a sign of deep thought).

"It must be a dynamo I get it. ."

"What did you say?" Gudal almost jumped with joy.

"A dynamo "

"No, that's not it," Gudal rejoined gloomily. "My son calls it something else. Come over to our house, Kesso You'll see something that will make your eyes pop out We dug a channel from the mill and built a dam according to all the rules Raised the water level a man's height There's a slope behind the house if you sit on your behind you'll fly down like an arrow We dug a ditch there—the water shoots through like a bullet When the machine starts turning we'll have lights, like in town. Not light but lightning!"

"So That's very good So you're building an electric station?"

"What did you say?" exclaimed Gudal, and then, recollecting, "No, not that!"

Although it had come as a complete surprise, Kesso approved of the undertaking. All of a sudden Gudal was building a station!—simply astonishing. Kesso did not want to let the man

go. It was very pleasant to look upon a Sak-enian who was doing something about electric lights.

"If not for the war, Gudal," he said, "we would have had electric lights long ago. Money was set aside in 1941 and we were included in the plan—a whole hydroelectric station would be operating here now."

"As sure as two and two make four it would!"

"Now, of course, we won't have lights before 1949. Too bad...."

Gudal climbed into his cart.

"Hold on, what about the ploughing?"

"Ploughing?" Gudal echoed. "I'm ready any time if the weather's good. Call the team, my plough's ready, and although my bullocks misbehave, they'll do their bit."

"Good! Tomorrow at seven."

"Six if you wish!"

Gudal shouted threateningly at the bullocks and they began to move. "Drop over, Kesso, and take a look at the station. You'll get a special invitation to the opening."

The cart turned to the left, and its squeaking could be heard all over Saken.

Kesso continued on his way. Soon, however, he heard Gudal screaming to him at the top of his lungs. Kesso stopped.

"Can you hear me?" yelled Gudal, who was hidden by the thickets.

"Yes, I can," answered Kesso.

"I remember now. Armature! Armature!"

"A dynamo armature," thought Kesso, quickening his steps.

8

The building of the Village Soviet looked a little more weathered and had lost all its windowpanes, but otherwise it had hardly changed since the war. The yard was as clean as it always had been, and the poplars planted in 1940 had grown taller and stronger.

The secretary, a smart-looking lad of twenty, was sitting in the small anteroom, explaining something to a group of peasants thronging about his table. Kesso greeted them all and asked after the health of each one, which took no little time.

The next door led into the chairman's office. This was a spacious room, with papered walls and a shaky table covered with red bunting. In the middle of the table was a clay plate filled with cigarette butts and dead midges.

Nikuala was sitting at the table, in the pose of a man who has spent a sleepless night dealing with affairs of state. His right cheek was propped up in his hand pulling his face awry. Kesso's entrance was acknowledged by a slight change of attitude on the part of the sitter, who transferred the prop to his left cheek.

On the window sill sat Konstantin Alan, one of the team leaders and secretary of the Party organization. Konstantin was a slow-thinking, taciturn man, while Nikuala was a great lover of speech. This gave their conversation a character all its own. Nikuala talked, while Konstantin answered in brief monosyllables chiefly of an ejaculatory nature. But they understood each other perfectly, and that, when all is said and done, is the main thing in conversation.

"Don't take that chair, you'll break your neck," the chairman warned the new arrival.

"So soon?" Kesso pulled up another chair

Konstantin enquired politely how the ex-serviceman was getting on. No doubt he found it quiet here after the big cities? Kesso must have seen many noisy cities in distant parts and—who knows—perhaps lived in some five-storey houses? . . . Yes, Kesso had lived in five-storey houses, but he preferred those of Saken, the wooden ones. Nikuala winked at the secretary as if to say—the fellow's putting on modest airs.

"What places have you been to?"

"Well, I passed from the Don to Germany. And let me tell you, friends, that I only learned to love our Saken the more and dreamed of getting back here as soon as possible."

Konstantin got up, poured himself some water from a jug and gulped down the whole mugful.

Silence fell. Kesso felt that he had made an impression on his listeners.

"Well, let's get down to business, shall we?" said Nikuala, breaking the silence. He took an open envelope out of a drawer. "This is a letter from the district administration . . .

All about the sowing and other important matters Got here by a miracle You know who brought it?" Nikuala looked closely at Kesso. "Who do you think?"

"To Saken?" said Konstantin, surprised. "So the road's open?"

"I didn't say that . It was Rashit who brought the letter from the district centre."

'What Rashit is that, Dowa?"

"The very same "

This news was discussed at great length. Nikuala said that Rashit had spent four years at the front and had changed for the better. Kesso very much doubted whether Rashit could make good even at the front It is now time to disclose a little secret of Rashit's He himself had kept it most carefully, and would not have given it away for anything The fact of the matter is that Rashit had never even smell powder He had served throughout the war in the commissary stores in the rear, where he had lain as low as a mouse There were men in the town who knew of this, but news does not travel fast to Saken

Rashit was known to have been on the spree for the past two days somewhere nearby,

and had not yet succeeded in reaching his home.

"He's a good lad taken all round," said the chairman "Asks to be given a job."

"Then I congratulate you with one scalamag the more," said Kesso coldly.

Konstantin hid a smile behind his moustache.

"Possibly," he agreed "But don't forget—five years have passed, and what years!" He was silent for a moment. "But that's not what I wanted to talk about What do you say to the letter, Nikuala?"

"Not a bad letter," said Nikuala, not without irony 'I'd like those' (he pointed for some reason into the right-hand corner of the room) "district people to come here first, and then write letters . Read it!" and Nikuala held the paper out to Kesso

It was a very blurred carbon copy of a typewritten circular and Kesso found it hard to decipher the words The letter said that that year the peasants were all out to get an exceptionally high crop yield—from five hundred to a thousand poods per hectare. "Today the whole world is watching us," it said. It was

the duty of Soviet people, including all the members of the Bright Ray Farm (the name was filled in by hand), to follow in the path laid down by the leading people of the countryside. Nineteen forty-seven must be a year of powerful growth in agriculture, the development of which had to a certain extent been hindered by the war. This was followed by the names of various people and details about them, and the best collective farms. . .

"Fine!" cried Kesso. "That's just what I've come about. That hits the nail right on the head. A thousand poods—wonderful, don't you think so?"

"Only it doesn't refer to us," Nikuala took out a huge handkerchief and blew his nose with great deliberation (like an accomplished orator about to regale his audience with a lengthy speech).

"Bless you," said Konstantin, who for some reason thought that Nikuala had sneezed.

Tucking his handkerchief away in his pocket, Nikuala began complaining of the district authorities' inability to treat every separate village and collective farm on its own particular merits instead of lumping them all

together. What did they know about Saken, for instance? Only that it was a long way off and difficult of access. About the crop yield, too. "It's easy to write down five hundred poods, a thousand poods! I could run off a paper too, one better than that. Sow the sea-shore, I'd say, and get a thousand poods. But what's the soil like, tell me that? We know only too well that our soil is good for nothing."

Nikuala angrily jammed his tall Astrakhan hat down over his head.

"Take hunting, now—that's another matter," he continued. "Think of all the fur we're losing! The profit it would bring the farm. Oh, what's the use of talking."

The chairman waved his hand hopelessly and called in the secretary. The lad sidled into the room like a mouse. His nose was very red, and he blew it almost incessantly.

"What's the matter with you?" the chairman demanded.

The secretary emitted a muffled sound resembling the noise of wind in a tree hollow.

"O ... ola ... co-od...."

"What?"

For answer, the secretary sneezed expressively, leaving no doubt whatsoever about what he had been trying to say

"He has a cold," said Konstantin, making a correct surmise "And got it pretty bad by the look of him"

"Wi'dow wi'dow d'aught," the lad squeezed out of himself, pointing to the window

"Window—that's clear And a draught—that's also clear What of it?" Nikuala's scornful glance swept over the homely figure of the secretary "D've think I'm made of different stuff from you? Look at me—I'm all right" In confirmation of which he blew all the air in his lungs out through his nose

Konstantin shivered

"The diatted wind does play the devil here," he remarked

Nikuala made as if he had not heard. Threatening some invisible person with his finger, he tried to make the secretary understand the answer that was to be sent to the district authorities, a hot 'un, as he expressed it. They were hammering at the wrong ad-

dress. Here in Saken they didn't have five hundred pood yields. The secretary began sneezing again.

"Well, go along, go along," said Nikuala in disgust. "Get it written."

The secretary disappeared.

Silence fell. The subject seemed to be exhausted and there was nothing left to say. Nikuala sat in full dignity in the chairman's seat picking his teeth with the sharpened end of a match. Konstantin drummed on the table. The sound irritated Kesso. "A queer fish," he thought. "Sees everything, understands everything, but keeps quiet as though the cat had his tongue. No, that won't do. If you're a Communist—take the bull by the horns. Don't think twice about it." A feeling of deep vexation rose in Kesso's breast. He got up abruptly, fastened his fur jacket closely, straightened his cap and pulled up his top boots.

"Was that all you wanted to say, Nikuala?"

"What else do you want?" said Nikuala with mock humility, spreading out his hands. "Isn't that enough for you?"

Kesso thrust his hands into his pockets..

"Not by a long chalk," he said drily "And even less than that . I thought we'd discuss real business .. It seems I was mistaken."

"Well, what is it you don't like?" Niku-ala turned to Konstantin "Let Kesso tell us, we're listening Isn't that right?"

Konstantin had evidently decided that it was time for him to have his say.

"Wait a bit," said he, and sitting down at the table he picked up a pencil, took a sheet of paper and began tracing on it mysterious symbols as he continued: "Everyone has his own mind And I have mine My advice is—don't be in too great a hurry with the reply Let's think it over, put our heads together ."

Konstantin spoke calmly and unhurriedly, with premeditation. The introduction pleased Kesso, and he sat down on the chair again

"First of all, Kesso evidently has something to say. . . " Konstantin looked enquiringly at the young man.

Kesso looked up eagerly

"I certainly have," he said with firm confidence. "And something very important. I

want to inform you that our team is going to show what a good crop yield in the mountains is. I look at it this way we've got to catch up with what the war has interfered with." He spoke warmly, half resentfully "We've got a certain plan. We stand for that letter!"

He picked the letter up from the table and held it aloft like a banner.

"All right, go on," said Nikuala. "Only first of all tell us your plan. Maybe it'll suit everybody, maybe it won't."

"Yes, that's plain," Konstantin agreed. "We can't have any secrets. If you've got a proposal, let's have it."

Kesso thought for a moment.

"No," he said finally, "not now. I want to talk it over with you first, Konstantin, after all you're acting as the collective farm chairman." He glanced at Nikuala out of the corner of his eye. "Can you come out to our team on the field tomorrow? The matter's too serious to be handled slap-bang."

Nikuala was rummaging in the table drawer as though paying no attention. Konstantin asked

"Tomorrow you're starting ploughing?"

"Yes "

"Fine! Good boys We'll get the others out too, and I'll drop in on the team," Konstantin promised

Kesso said goodbye and left

. 9 .

Rashut's drinking bout lasted two days His companions of the bottle superseded one another and every one deemed himself in duty bound to enquire about Rashut's war experiences And with each bottle the number and versions of his wartime yarns increased The hero of these tales (Rashut himself) had ambushed the enemy, rushed into daring attacks, and flown and swum rivers without end The wine being exceptionally strong, all his boon companions were nothing loath to take these yarns on faith Only Adamur, who with good reason called himself "an old bird that you don't catch with chaff," was sometimes jarred by some particularly tall story But precisely because he was such a wily old bird, he saw no need to embarrass his tipsy guest with un-called-for remarks.

At last (for even Sakenians hold that every spree has its limit) Rashit, after taking a hair of the dog in the morning, bent his steps homewards to his aunt. He went by the back yards in the best of spirits, hands thrust swaggingly in his pockets and whistling a merry tune.

Rashit's progress was not inspired by any particular aim, unless it be that most natural of feelings that draws a man to the bosom of his family which he has not seen for several years. Kindled affection, however, was not Rashit's weak spot. For no sooner did he draw level with the hotbeds and hear the ringing laughter of women than he instantly struck off the path and made a beeline for the alluring sound.

Guls were working along the beds. Several young men were mixing fermenting manure with loam. Nearby the sifted mixture was being warmed, and a grey vapour lay thickly over the ground.

Kama, her arms muddy to the elbows, was levelling one of the beds. Nina squatted opposite her gauging the depth of the layer with a little stick. The two girls exchanged swift

glances when they saw the well-knit figure of a young man approaching. Kama adjusted her kerchief and Nina slightly changed her position. As for the other people working there, each reacted to the stranger's appearance in his or her own way. Only Daud, the hotbed manager, seemed utterly indifferent to the event—being too shortsighted to mark it. He was carefully examining the frames, stooping over them till his moustache touched the glass.

Rashit proclaimed solemnly:

"Peace to this house! *Hande hoch!*"

The girls looked blankly at each other, but their smiles betrayed a total lack of any hostile feeling towards this gay young man.

"It's Rashit," Kama whispered to Nina, and both girls rose slightly to greet him.

"Good morning," said Daud, blinking his unseeing eyes. Coming close up to the newcomer, he cried: "Well, if it isn't Rashit!"

Rashit's eyes travelled swiftly over the girls. His smile for Nina as much as said—I recognize you. But glancing at Kama's lowered face, Rashit ground his teeth (a sign of extreme interest) and brought to rest upon her a piercing, observant gaze.

With another fiery glance at Kama, intended to carry her completely off her feet, Rashit addressed himself to Daud. He spoke in the condescending tone of a man of the world.

"Preparing the soil, old chap?"

Daud, glad of the chance to boast about the work of his friends, was prepared to initiate the young man into all the secrets of his craft.

"Listen, Rashit, I can tell you our secret." Daud winked slyly and licked his wind-chapped lips. "But just between ourselves, of course. Have you noticed that we're handling the seedlings earlier than we've ever done before? Do you know what that means?"

The old man launched into a detailed account of the hotbed business. The plan was fifty thousand roots, but Daud was determined to double that figure. Good seedlings meant a good crop. Of course, nothing near what a good crop ought to be—the sort they grew down on the plains. For that matter, it was time to be thinking of putting things on a more prosperous footing in Saken as well. That meant that the hotbed business had to be brought up to the mark too. Wasn't that right?

Daud put his arms akimbo and threw his grey head back with an air of importance

"What for?" asked Rashit absently. "What d'you want an extra fifty thousand for?"

"What do you mean—what for? It'll mean more tobacco. . . And then we can always sell the seedlings for planting out. . . ."

Rashit spat unconcernedly and held out his hand to the old man.

"I'll take what's left. Is it a go?"

The old man was dumfounded

"You?"

"Yes. . . ." Rashit leaned over to Daud and said loudly, for all to hear. "I'll wear 'em in my buttonhole!"

The girls spluttered with suppressed laughter.

Rashit was pleased with his jest. But he felt awkward before the old man.

"But joking apart . . ." he said apologetically. "I'd like to help you."

Daud shrugged his shoulders and went back to his frames. Rashit sat down beside the girls.

"Give me something to do," he said.

Nina pointed to a bucket.

"You're welcome. Bring some manure over here."

Rashit pulled a comical face, and, rolling up his sleeves, hastened to carry out the commission. In a second he filled the bucket to the brim, and pretending to gasp and groan beneath the weight, brought it back to the beds. The guls laughed heartily at his antics.

"How jolly he is," Nina whispered to Kama.

"Well, guls, now tell me about yourselves." Rashit levelled down the soil, breaking up the clods with his fingers. "How's life, and work? How's love?"

"Well, we're working, as you see," Nina replied. "Our boss," she nodded towards Daud, "is a very strict man. And today more than ever. He got us started almost before winter was over, there was still snow on the ground. We're going to begin sowing soon."

"And hasn't he any pity for you?" Rashit smiled at Kama and whispered. "What sweet little hands."

The gul blushed furiously and pretended to be absorbed in her work. Rashit continued his efforts to engage her in talk. But just then Daud came up when he was least wanted.

"I can see some shoots on those beds," he said. "And look, a pane's broken—the night frost may nip the tender sprouts Eh?"

Daud sent the girls to the hotbeds.

"Mind, not a single blade of grass!" he admonished them. "It's not grass we're sowing, but seedlings. Kama, you prepare the mixture and sprinkle the young shoots Look lively."

"What mixture is that?" Rashit asked Kama.

"Stop your chatter, young man," Daud shouted "I won't have you making love to our girls Distracting them from their work."

"D'you hear?" Nina came and stood between Kama and Rashit "Daud's angry. . And my brother'll be still angrier." She winked slyly at Rashit

"Brother, did you say? Undo my collar, somebody, or I'll choke with jealousy," said Rashit. And he dashed off to the well with a fierce cry, rattling the empty buckets.

"How funny he is, Nina," said Kama.

"He's taken a fancy to you."

"I don't think so"

"It was because of you he stayed here," Nina insisted.

Kama waved her hand deprecatingly and went to water the hotbeds.

Rashit was dashing like an imp round a fire, shouting.

"At 'em, lads! Ours are winning! *Hande hoch!*"

Daud noted the life and gaiety which Rashit infused into the work. 'The right sort of lad,' he told himself. But after an hour or so the old man began to tire of the commotion Rashit was raising, and started to look askance at the too lively spark. The girls, however, were highly pleased—they were working and enjoying themselves at the same time. Rashit carried four buckets at once shouting out military commands.

"Train the gun! Sight—twenty! Fire!"

And the empty buckets went rattling over the ground

+ 10 +

Kesso dreamed he was climbing a steep mountain. He was in a great hurry and gasped for breath. Upon opening his eyes, he saw before him the grey square of the window—and

jumped up. He lit the oil lamp. The clock hands were nearing five.

Kesso dressed swiftly and went down to the kitchen, where his father was lying by the fire which had smouldered all night. Despite the early hour, the old man already had his pipe between his teeth.

"What's got you up at this unearthly hour?" he asked his son.

"It's time to go, Father. It wouldn't look well to be the last there."

The old man began to dress, grumbling as he did so.

"Tell your sister to bring me my boots."

Nina was sleeping in the next room. Her full lips stirred in her sleep, and Kesso even listened to hear if she was speaking. But she was fast asleep, breathing evenly, and her brother felt sorry to have to waken her.

"Can't be helped..." Kesso touched his sister's arm, then shook it gently.

The girl turned over onto her side, nuzzled into the pillow again for a moment, and then opened her eyes.

"The lazy days are over," said Kesso. "Get up, it's time to go to work. It's spring!"

A colourless sky hung sheet-like over the earth. It would be half an hour yet before the first timid glow would bathe the peaks of Klych, while Mount Guagua would still stand a grim shadow in the rays of the rising sun.

Kesso loved this time of day in Saken, the hour when one most keenly sensed the mighty breath of a new day which seemed to bring with it not only light but new thoughts, new impulses and desires....

First of all Kesso and Yekup examined the plough. Everything was in order there. The old man fingered the cold iron and walked round the plough several times with obvious gratification. But the appearance of the bullocks was far less satisfying.

"They've grown lean over the winter," he remarked. "It's no easy job to lay in sufficient fodder for them."

Kesso did not agree. Speaking rather to himself than to his father, he said:

"We're queer folks ... Nature's spoiled us ... We expect her to hand out everything to us, like a beggar asking alms.... We treat the beasts as we would weeds.... Let them fend for themselves, instead of laying in a

little more hay for the winter. . . And we've got such rich meadows, well worth mowing. . . ."

"I like that!" The old man stared at his son in surprise. "Whoever's heard of such a thing as preparing breakfast and dinner for the beasts?!"

"That's just the trouble, that no one here has heard about it." Kesso yoked the submissive bullocks. "Well, let's go!"

The plough rattled noisily over the level yard

Nobody was in the field yet. The stubble of last year's maize projected dismally from the ground, the early morning mists rolling lazily over it.

Kesso unharnessed the bullocks. The old man squatted down and busied himself with his tobacco pouch while his son went to look for a long switch.

Soon the whole team arrived. Gudal brought another plough on a cart. The plough's share shone like a mirror.

"A real razor," Gudal boasted.

Anton, shivering in the morning chill, was smoking a rolled cigarette. Elderly peasants surrounding old Mirba cracked jokes among themselves.

A man's figure appeared on the farther side of the field. He came towards the team, stopping now and then to test the surface of the ground with his foot. Coming up, he said in a deep bass:

"The soil's fine . . . How do, Comrades!"

"Good morning, Konstantin!"

"How do!"

Konstantin took Kesso aside

"Your team's the first out I've been round the whole village "

Kesso wrung his hand, appreciative of the praise.

"Say a few words to them A sort of send-off," asked Kesso.

Konstantin made a gesture of protest.

"Spare me that. . . Talk to them yourself, and we'll listen."

Kesso wanted to say something simple yet impressive, something to hearten them for the job in hand, as a commander at the front would speak to his men before an offensive.

Overcome with an agitation quite natural under the circumstances, he turned to Konstantin with a question in his eyes. Konstantin said softly:

"The harvest.... A good crop.... Give your own pledge first...."

Kesso nodded in agreement

"Comrades!"

The word came in a shout as though he were facing a crowd of at least a thousand instead of twenty. . The peasants were startled at their team leader's unnaturally loud voice.

"Comrades," Kesso repeated more calmly. "We're starting field work. This is a big day. Why?—you'll ask. Haven't people ploughed and sowed before us? Yes, they have. But we're going to put up a fight for a record harvest, we've come out to show something new . . Not a hundred poods, but..." he paused, then took the plunge—"but five hundred poods, let us say.... In war we overcame a formidable enemy, we showed a miracle to the world. Do you mean to say we shan't be able to tackle the soil, even our Saken soil? We say. Hundreds of poods! Nothing less! Nothing less!"

The peasants exchanged embarrassed glances—their team leader was going too far.

"We'll say thank you for that," said Anton sarcastically.

Here and there rose a laugh.

"I give you my word, Anton, five hundred, and maybe more. . . And no jiggery-pokery about it," Kesso continued heatedly. "We're going to work the fields properly—the main thing is fertilizers."

"Where are you going to get all the manure from?" somebody observed

Kesso went on

"We'll need manure too We'll collect it along all the roads and meadows, not to mention the yards. But that's not enough We need a plentiful supply of cheap fertilizer close at hand Isn't that right?"

"That's right enough," said Gudal. "We all realize that."

But it was clear that not all of them understood what Kesso was driving at. A harvest was a fine thing, nobody could deny it But to dive right in and promise five hundred poods—just like that—seemed very strange and incomprehensible. Yekup felt that his son

had got himself into deep water. Seizing the opportunity presented by a moment's silence, he said:

"Fertilizer's the first thing in our work—who doesn't know that? But where are we to get it, that's the problem"

Kesso blurted out warmly:

"I know, I know where to get it. We have a rock—a marvellous rock." And he broke into a hymn of praise of Mercy Cliff. But the more he talked, the greater the doubts that arose. What if all this were exaggerated? Well, suppose the cliff did contain phosphorite. But what was the content—who could answer that? Kesso realized that they did not fully accept his word. And for an instant he himself had qualms of doubt about this idea of his.

Suppose the cliff really did let him down? What was he to do then?

"Let's sit down," he suggested to gain time, forgetting that there was nothing to sit on. Konstantin came up and spoke to him in an undertone.

"What about cultivation? The tending of the fields? Sowing on good time? The plough-

ing, the weeding—work to throw yourself into! Doesn't that count for anything?"

Kesso threw Konstantin a glance over his shoulder and nodded gratefully. To be sure, proper cultivation meant a great deal! Considerably buoyed up, Kesso squared his shoulders proudly

"My dear Comrades! Supposing we don't get fertilizer"—he smiled as though admitting the impossible—"even so . . . We say—the rules of agronomy say—plough deeply—twenty to twenty-five centimetres; plough twice, harrow carefully, weed often and thoroughly, hate the weeds like your worst enemy, drive them off the field! . . . Further. The experience of the best collective farms shows we should sow in rows, even rows at equal intervals. I see that some of you find that funny. But you go down to the plains and see how people work there, and then you'll lay your hand on your heart and say they are doing things better than we are."

The peasants nodded and sighed.

"There, you see," Kesso continued with the air of a conqueror. "We don't work the right way. We've given up our soil as a bad job,

believing that because our granddads got nothing out of it neither shall we. But let's buckle down to the job properly, all together, and then—I swear—we'll get a yield of not less than three hundred poods per hectare I'll eat my hat if we don't! The whole country's driving ahead, and it's a shame for us of Saken to lag behind."

Konstantin supported him

"He's talking sense."

Anton came forward Clutching his throat and making a show of gasping for breath, he said.

"If we choke ourselves with work we'll very likely get a splendid harvest," and with a comical skip disappeared into the crowd.

There was a ripple of suppressed laughter.

"I'll have something to say to you afterwards . . . You hear?" Kesso shouted after Anton.

Konstantin brought him back to earth with a touch of his hand.

"Yes, yes," said Kesso He took off his cap and, pointing to the field, shouted "Now—let's get to work!"

Yekup was angry with his son "Has the

fellow gone crazy? ' he thought. "What's he want to brag for?" But he did not want to snub the team leader in public. "I'll have it out with him when we get home," he decided.

Kesso issued his instructions to the team

"We've got to clear the field of stubble and big stones. Throw the stones into that gully and pile up the stubble and burn it. That's our first job."

"Comrades of the farm team," said Konstantin. "You're the first out for the spring sowing. Tomorrow others will follow your example. Now the thing is—not to fall behind!"

The team voiced noisy approval. Somebody struck up a song, and the peasants went into the field singing.

That was but the first step, thought Kesso. Never before had ploughing been started so early in Saken. And that was not to be sneezed at.

* 11 *

Konstantin and Kesso climbed to the top of a little hill and stood like generals surveying a battlefield. Gudal and his farm group were making for a section of the field beyond

the nearby wood Anton had been assigned the opposite end of the field where he could be kept under observation. All dispersed to the various sections assigned them.

"So far, so good," said Konstantin, examining some papers he held in his hand. "Tomorrow I reckon the others will be out on the fields too."

"It's important, Konstantin, very important that it should be no later than tomorrow."

"We'll fix that. But I was thinking of that other matter. That crop yield business, Kesso. I hope you weren't making empty promises. . . . You get me?"

Kesso, without saying a word, took Konstantin's arm and drew him along

"Come," he said, "I want to consult you about it"

Kesso turned off onto a footpath that wound its way over the slopes, dipping into a small depression, then rising again. The path ran on ahead like a huge yellow snake plunging into a thicket.

"Do you see," Kesso was saying excitedly. "The thought of that cliff is on my brain all

the time, it gives me no peace . I looked up the district authorities on my way home. And on all sides you hear about high crop yields . . harvest record breakers. . . Now, I thought, why shouldn't we in Saken too cast about for a way to get things moving—we can't go on sitting with folded hands. If my leg hadn't let me down I'd have tackled the thing back in the autumn . . .”

That cliff, which was within five minutes' walk of where they stood, had been preying on Kesso's mind for a long time. Before the outbreak of the war he had everything ready to test it's potency That sheet of notepaper written by the sick official was never out of his mind In general, there had been a good deal of talk in Saken about that cliff before the war, somebody had written about it in the district paper, and the collective farm blacksmith had even contrived some sort of crushing machine But then came the war, Kesso was swept away to distant parts, the blacksmith was killed, and the Sakenians had other things to think of besides the cliff. And then, when he was on his way home, some-

where on the western frontier of the country, the thought of this cliff smote the young mountaineer's brain with renewed force. He lay on the top sleeping shelf in the train, staring at the dark, narrow planks of the roof. Down below some veteran soldiers were carrying on a conversation, their heads close together. But it was not the past they talked about, it was the future. And the future it was that occupied Kesso's mind as well. He could see himself at home, there at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains, and could distinctly see that cliff with the crooked tree growing on it . . .

Kesso and Konstantin walked briskly, shoulder to shoulder, barely able to keep abreast on the narrow path. They leaped a brook simultaneously, as though at a word of command, came out into a glade, and there directly in front of them stood the tall grey cliff. Its edges were bordered with greenery, and on the very top grew a crooked tree, like a question mark.

Kesso drew his breath. He took off his cap and pushed his hair back from his forehead.

"Listen," he began, peering furtively around him, for all the world like a conspirator. "Our soil is poor, not much better than sand on the seashore. Our grandfathers and great-grandfathers squeezed it dry. If we want to live decently off it, we've got to fertilize it right up to here"—he passed his hand across his throat. "But where are we to get fertilizer from? That's the problem! Here are no roads, no bridges—only an aeroplane can get through. I can't get this cliff out of my head. There must have been some reason why our forebears called it Mercy Cliff. What if we sprinkle earth from this cliff on our fields?"

"What, these rocks?" Konstantin interrupted him.

"Why rocks? We'd have to crush them, I suppose. . . Well, smash them with a hammer, or something. It's worth trying."

Konstantin, by way of reply, picked up two pieces of rock lying at his feet, struck them against each other and looked at Kesso dubiously. It was certainly not going to be an easy matter to crush that hard stone to powder with hammers. Konstantin played with the

pieces, then tossed them up into the air without even troubling to see where they fell. He brushed the dust off his hands, clapped Kesso patronizingly on the shoulder and said.

"You're a hothead. . . "

"That's no answer." Kesso's voice bore an edge. He clipped his words. "There's such a thing as superphosphate, it's made in factories. But here heaven has sent us this thing ready made, and it's called natural phosphorite."

"Never heard of it, really," Konstantin confessed.

"You're our secretary, and acting farm chairman. A great deal depends on you. It's no use looking to Nikuala, he's too lazy to stir a finger. . . . Listen, I propose that we set about this business in an organized way. Put men and carts on the job, tell all the people about it—it'll be easier to tackle with the whole collective farm backing it." There was absolute confidence in Kesso's tone as he went on explaining his plan for organizing the work of stone crushing.

Konstantin listened for a long while patiently, then at last interrupted him.

"My dear friend," he said gently. "It's a good idea. A very good idea. But it's not an easy job, it wants thinking over."

"But spring?" Kesso cried impatiently. "Spring won't wait!"

"There'll be other springs if we miss this one," Konstantin answered calmly. "Now my advice is this: the thing's got to be properly studied, maybe it would be advisable to start an experimental section.... It wants discussing with the district centre . with agronomists... You said the right thing about cultivating the soil, looking after it properly. That's the right kind of talk—working the way the leading collective farms do... " Then, after a pause, he added: "Are you quite sure about the cliff? 'What did you call it—phosphorite? "

It was like a cold douche to Kesso. His brow darkened, and without saying another word he walked away. On the way back, Konstantin was saying something to him in a soothing tone, as though trying to excuse himself. But Kesso heard nothing, he was filled with chagrin. Here was a man who had opened his heart, one might say—like a confession of love—and had been politely rejected. It was

worse than a smack in the face, it hurt more poignantly than any pain. People did not believe him, that was plain. .

They were back again in the field. The mist had risen, and the first rays of the sun stabbed the earth like sabres. Birds sang in the sky, and a fair hot day broke, almost summerlike in its warmth.

"Kesso," said Konstantin, smiling in a guilty sort of way (he realized that he had offended the lad), "think well before you act. The cliff won't run away from us. The main thing is proper working of the soil, everything has to be done on time, people should put their hearts into the job. Get me? You said yourself that you'd fight for a good harvest, cliff or no cliff." With a sweeping gesture he indicated the field stretching before them, and said solemnly: 'A harvest such as the mountains have never seen!'

The glance Kesso threw at him was none too warm. He growled through his teeth:

"Thanks for the advice, Comrade Secretary . . I guess I'll manage without it"

Kama was in that particular mood when you cannot say just why you feel so happy. Not that there is any secret about it. Not at all! But you simply do not know the reason yourself. It may have been the cool, very bright moonlit evening, the even bluish light in which everything around—trees, the mountains and the road—was bathed. It may have been because that rather gloomy but very lovable man Kesso Mirba was walking by her side. Or it might simply be that one's twenty-first spring brings new stirrings to an already restless heart

Whatever it was, Kesso sensed the unusual elation in his sweetheart. Lending but half an ear to her talk, he pondered incessantly over the matter which was never out of his mind. Tortured by his own doubts, he rehearsed heated arguments with Nikuala and Konstantin and with everyone who dared to question the feasibility of his undertaking. When it came to what the practical executives in the district centre would call concrete proposals, the matter was not quite so clear.

Kesso understood perfectly well that the whole plan for fertilizing the maize fields would go up in smoke if Mercy Cliff turned out to be merely one of Nature's scenic features, without any useful properties. On the other hand, they could manage without the cliff, simply relying on their own hands and the peasant's ability to wrest from the soil everything it was capable of giving. Strictly speaking, there were still tremendous untapped resources available without cliff and without fertilizers. Whatever way you looked at it, the business was complicated by the fact that the properties of the cliff were still an unknown quantity and there was no way of ascertaining them here in Saken. One needed specialists for that, a laboratory, an analysis. . . .

Kama laughed heartily when her story came to the point where Rashit (it was he whom she was talking about) had picked up four buckets and dashed them on the ground. The drift of her conversation reached Kesso, who had hitherto been listening to it as to some distant echo.

"Hold on," he said. "What was that Rashit doing there?"

"What d'you mean? Weren't you listening? I've been telling you for the last hour He volunteered to help us. Rashit's an awfully jolly fellow. Nina and I laughed till we cried."

"I suppose you were flirting with him?"

Kama turned up her nose

"Just a wee bit, perhaps"

They took several steps in silence.

"What about that turkey cock Nikuala?" asked the still morose Kesso.

Kama said that he had been at their house, asked about how things were going; had said he happened to be passing that way and just dropped in.

"He's a liar," said Kesso.

"He promised us an abatement of taxes, said there's some law about it for old people"

"And who've you got that's so old?"

"Father, mother. . ."

"Can't you see that he's only pulling your leg? He just wants to win your favour!" cried the mountaineer. "He's got no authority to lower taxes. And your parents aren't as old as all that."

"But suppose there is such a law?" remonstrated Kama.

Kesso was deaf to her arguments. He showered reproaches on the girl who, as he thought, let men flirt with her through sheer frivolity. There seemed to be no end to his scathing remarks. Kama tried to protest. Having exhausted every other means of persuasion, she simply started to cry. Kesso, in a fit of remorse, drew her to him and she did not repulse him.

He pressed his cheek to her own cool cheek and whispered tender words into her ear the meaning of which, incoherent though they were, could not be obscure to the dullest girl. It was enough, Kama was comforted. And they walked on, reconciled, pleased with each other. He was glad that she was so kind and tender, and, chiefly, so docile, and the lovers strolled on under the moonlight with their arms round each other, oblivious of everything else in the world.

Kama was the first to break the silence.

"Why don't you say anything about yourself?" she asked tenderly.

"What's there to tell? The usual round of work. You know, of course, that we've started ploughing. Folks say it's a bit too early. . . . In

fact, we've startled all Saken. But what do we care? We're going by the rules ... I've had some words with Konstantin...."

"You shouldn't have done that." Kama wriggled out of his embrace "He's a good man. If you can't get along with him, you'll only have yourself to blame!"

"It's not that, Kama. It's something quite different. He doesn't believe me. We need to take the bull by the horns, but he ..."

Kesso laid out all his plans before her. There was something about that cliff—that was a fact. Natural phosphorite—a store of fertilizer right under their noses. A treasure-trove for the collective farm. . . Yet Konstantin didn't seem to realize how important it was.

"Still, you shouldn't quarrel with him," said Kama. "He's a good man."

They had reached the place where she usually freed her hand from his, tucked her tumbled hair under her kerchief and looked round apprehensively. But today Kesso was in no hurry. He drew the girl into the shade of a huge plane tree, and they settled down comfortably against its thick bole.

The air was wonderfully fresh and clear. A measured rumble came from the Saken River valley where the water was flowing over the sandbanks. The moonlight was reflected all along the winding course of the Saken, silvering its ripples.

The lovers sat enjoying the majestic panorama spread out before them, and only Kama listened alertly to the stillness around, starting at every rustle on the path.

"Listen," she said, regaining her composure after one of these false alarms "You're not looking for fame, are you?"

Kesso at that moment was somewhere in the clouds, soaring perhaps above the summit of Mount Guagua, and he did not immediately grasp the question.

"What was that you said? Fame?" he asked in surprise. "I don't know. . . . I don't think so. . . . Why do you ask?"

"Oh, just like that. . . ."

Upon his insistent pleading, she explained what she had in mind.

"Nikuala told my people that you're a great boaster."

"He put it stronger, of course?"

"Maybe. . ."

Kesso mused. Fame!—wasn't that too big a word?

"Well, what can I say? . . . I was at the front. . . I thought a lot about you, and our Saken. . . But about fame? . No, it never entered my head."

"Why don't you wear your medals?"

Kesso patted her cheek.

"I will if you want me to, and certainly on holidays. . ."

"No, you're not a boaster," said Kama softly

He drew her to him again, and she laid her head trustingly on his breast. They sat motionless and silent, like the nocturnal world around them, happy in each other's love.

Work in the farm team was in full swing Kesso did not stand for any nonsense The slightest sign of slackness and he would haul the culprit over the coals. Anton was the one who was most frequently in hot water. In

fact, Anton was the most difficult member of the team.

He was always last to come out in the field—he was either sick, he said, or his children's coughing had kept him awake all night. . . .

"I'm what I am," he said to Gudal, who was giving him a well-earned wiggling. "You leave me alone . . . I'll get along myself somehow. I've managed to live, thank God, and haven't died yet. What's the sense in nagging at me all the time? . I love my freedom, brother, that's what it is!"

Kesso came up and sat down by the disputants.

"Here, my friend," he said, "tell us about this freedom you love so much!"

"Well, what's the ideal?" cried Anton. "It's like this—I like to live by my own brains and not other people's. Teaching me what to do as though I'd never sown maize, never seen it grow in my life! No, brother, I like to use my own brains"

"And supposing they're too scanty?"

"What's that you said?" Anton flushed red and leapt to his feet with unusual nimbleness.

"Look here," said Kesso, turning to the peasants standing round them. "Our friend Anton says that he wants to live by his own brains. And I say he's a loafer and a good-for-nothing. Several years ago when Anton was living by his own brains, he had a wretched wattled shanty for a home. Then he joined us in the collective farm, and we all helped him to build himself a real house. We helped to put Anton on his feet, and now he's sticking up his nose . . ."

"Nothing of the sort!" Anton squealed.

"Comrades," Kesso continued, waving down the strident voice as he would a mosquito humming about his ear. "I ask you—is that gratitude?"

"Quite right, quite right," Gudal agreed.

"Needs the stuffing knocked out of him," a voice put in.

Anton kept silent, fiddling about nervously with his tobacco pouch. Kesso, sensing that the peasants understood him and were all on his side, waxed firmer.

"Look here, Anton—if you don't like it in my team, good riddance—no one's going to hold you by force. . . . Mind you don't re-

gret it afterwards! If you feel like working with us, then stop fooling around and get down to business Understand?"

The peasants went back to their places. Anton jammed his cap down on his head and followed suit

At midday Nikuala put in an appearance. He eyed the field and casually kicked a clod of earth turned up by the plough.

"Working?" he said.

Kesso went up and greeted him.

Nikuala drifted in a confused sort of way about the ploughed field, looking at the furrows.

"How much?"

"You mean depth? Twenty to twenty-five centimetres," Kesso replied.

"Going to use dressing?"

Kesso's eyes seemed to bore through the chairman.

"Any objections?"

"I?" Nikuala shrugged his shoulders. "What's it got to do with me? You didn't ask my permission . If it works out all right, we'll say thank you . . . If not, you'll get it in the neck."

"Well, that's the way it should be..." Kesso linked his arm in Nikuala's. Don't you worry. I'll put it all down on paper and give it to you..."

"On paper?" Nikuala asked in surprise (he had a horror of papers).

"Why, yes, a report. . . An explanation Call it what you like . "

The chairman grunted his acquiescence The team's work had left him satisfied.

"I see Anton's working famously," Nikuala observed.

"We had a little chat with him!"

Nikuala took his leave, saying that he was going to visit the other farm teams where things were not faring so well

"The management's still going strong," announced Kesso and threw his weight onto the plough "Let's have a song!" he shouted.

That is a thing Sakenians never have to be asked twice. They are great singers. The peasants struck up in chorus, at first rather raggedly, but swinging more and more into harmony. The song seemed to give them added strength People living down below asked each other, in surprise:

"Where's that song coming from?"

And while they wracked their heads, the familiar merry song soared over their heads like a bird in the blue heavens

On the green meadow under the hill
Stands a deer,
Very young still

Haven't you ever seen the deer
Under the hill?

He's a-waiting for his sweetheart, so they say,
A-waiting for his sweetheart
The livelong day .

Haven't you seen the very young deer
On that sparkling day?

* 14 *

Rashit's appearance in Saken at a time when the road there was considered impassable was a topic of conversation round the family hearth. How had he travelled, how had he surmounted all the obstacles? Had he ventured alone, or had experienced hunters helped him to find the way? This was all very interesting. Rashit volunteered no explanations and turned all queries off with a jest, hinting at some kind of special help

from the district authorities. People who didn't know Rashit scratched their heads, thinking—oho, that lad must be a big pot! But Rashit's intention of opening a shoemaker's workshop in the collective farm caused a still greater stir.

"I'm going to be a high-class shoemaker," he announced, with some show of pride.

Such a thing as a high-class shoemaker had never been heard of in Saken. At first nobody believed it. Folks made enquiries of the secretary of the Village Soviet. That youth (by this time the cold in his head had passed) confirmed that Rashit was to manage the new workshop. This was verily an astonishing piece of news.

Then came the still more thrilling rumour of Kesso Mirba's amazing undertaking—people quoted the tentative figures of the maize and tobacco crop that he had announced—and the talk of Rashit was thrust into the background, drowned in the greater wave of public discussion.

This latest piece of news aroused keen interest. After all, one might not believe Kesso Mirba, one might not agree with him,

but the dream of an unprecedented harvest was alluring in itself.

When the chairman of the Village Soviet was asked about the young team leader's canny plans, Nikuala gave inarticulate sort of answers. Evidently he could not make up his mind to approve them. Yet he was reluctant to censure them, since nobody could tell how it might work out in the end. The situation, as they say in Saken, was worse than that of the quail—you couldn't go on sitting and it was dangerous to take wing.

Strange as it might seem, it was Adamur, the store manager, who took the greatest interest in Kesso's plans with regard to Mercy Cliff.

"Rashit," he asked his friend one day with assumed indifference, "are they inventing gunpowder in Silver Meadow?"

"Maybe dynamite?" said Rashit, whose thoughts were rather muddled after one of his current drinking bouts.

"They say it's a valuable cliff, that one," Adamur drawled thoughtfully. "Amazing!"

But Rashit was far from earthly matters. Paying no attention to his boon companion,

he suddenly pronounced a toast which had not the slightest bearing on what had been said:

"Here's to love!" and drained his glass at a gulp.

Adamur winked knowingly.

"The land's mine, you know . . ." he went on after a pause, then added with a sigh. "At least it was "

"What land, Adamur?"

"Both the land and the cliff that's on it were mine. And now, my friend, a fortune's going to be made out of it. . . ."

"Well, what of it? Kesso's no fool, he'll just thumb his nose at you."

"You think so? After all, he's a relation of mine . . ."

Rashit showed Adamur the bottom of his glass—a plain hint among drinkers. The glass was refilled.

"Try to win him round, Adamur, do a bit of wheedling and whining—maybe you'll get some share in the game. . . . Saken is a bear's den of a spot; maybe you'll have luck. Remember—this is Saken, Saken—unequalled in its way, maybe even unique. . . ."

"Kesso's a cunning rogue," said Adamur despondently. "They say he's tramped through half the world. Well, what will be, will be!"

They clinked glasses.

"Here's to the high-class workshop! Your luck in love! I hear that you've got a crush on Kama. If you've got it that bad, why stick at trifles," and, leaning over, Adamur said softly, "A cloak, a good horse, reliable friends—and your bride's in your pocket!"

Rashit turned a fuzzy gaze on Adamur's flushed face.

"And if I ask for help?"

Adamur stretched out a fat, hairy hand.

"Here it is!" he cried.

15

The ploughing was coming to an end. It wanted but a few more days of fair weather. But the weather was visibly changing for the worse. Clouds came driving up from the south. They drifted over Saken, showering tiny drops of rain. . .

Kesso spent all his time in the fields, from early morning till late at night. He had his hands full, what with showing everyone what to do, checking the depth of the ploughing and making provisions for the next day. Kesso was well satisfied with his section. No matter what the soil was, at least it was not scattered over too great a distance and every one of his farm groups was within earshot. As for it being all red soil and sand—that was Saken's bad luck since the day of creation. If you left everything to the kindness of the Saken soil, you'd get only a dole, and not a real harvest. But you could make it sing a different song by putting your foot down, instead of letting it have its own way.

Gudal was urging on the bullocks. His loud, ringing voice could be heard from one end of the field to the other. At the close of the day Kesso usually joined Gudal's group and walked home with its leader.

When he drew level with Kesso, Gudal took a note out of his pocket and handed it to him.

"What's that?" asked Kesso in surprise.

A quarter-sheet from an exercise book, with a frame drawn round the borders, contained the following neatly written inscription.

"Invitation.

"You are requested to come tomorrow,
Sunday The electric light will be opened

'Yours truly,
Gudal."

"Oho, real city style, invitation cards and all . . . Thanks very much, said Kesso 'Got it all fixed up?'"

'It was my son's idea. He's a real live wire, that fellow is, and is always egging me on to all kinds of tricks. Come along, anyway, and we'll have a good time. I have my doubts, though. I can't seem to believe that my boy's really going to start up electric lights here, in this Saken of ours."

"Well, thanks once more." Kesso folded the paper neatly and put it away. "And now we'll measure the depth."

Kesso thrust a measuring stick into the furrow. Both he and Gudal stooped down close to the ground.

"Less than twenty You've made a bad job of it, brother," said Kesso, annoyed "Put more guts in it, don't make me blush before people "

"Damn it!" Gudal cried and spat "D'you mean to say two centimetres are worth worrying about?"

"They are. You bear this in mind, anyway two centimetres deeper is a good thing, but two less is a bad one, brother Then, catching the hurt look that flitted across Gudal's good-humoured face, he continued more gently "You don't like to hear that, eh? But what if we disgrace ourselves and don't reach the target? We've got to plough strictly according to the rules—forget about fertilizers Just tell yourself there isn't any cliff."

"What's that?" exclaimed Gudal "What d'you mean there's no cliff?"

Kesso rose (he had been squatting all this time)

"Well, anything can happen, Gudal Suppose nothing comes of the cliff. Is that to be an end of everything? We'll manage without it. Get me?" Then he corrected himself:

'We'll probably get a smaller yield, but all the same it'll be a decent showing Three hundred poods I'll guarantee!'

He held out his hand, and after a second's thought Gudal slapped it with his own stiff, horny palm.

. Towards evening the sky darkened. A wind rose. There was an autumn-like chill in the air. And then, as though someone had gathered all the clouds in the sky and suddenly wrung them out over Saken—down came the rain, an unpleasant, stinging rain more like pins than drops of water.

On dark, rainy evenings, if the mind be not troubled with thoughts of the morrow, a pleasant drowsiness steals over a person.

On such an evening, when the fire is burning brightly on the hearth, crackling and flinging merry sparks in all directions, a man's world is apt to be confined to the family circle sitting round the hearth. On evenings such as this everything seems to stop short at one's own threshold, where the inky blackness of the night begins. And only

in some deep corner of the consciousness lives the thought of morning, which will fling open the door to the wide spaces and reveal to the eye the beautiful, boundless world. And then how stuffy and cramped the house will seem, with its fireplace on the earthen floor and grey ashes stirring in the wind.

. The rain was pattering on the roofs of Saken's cottages. Runnels trickled down onto the beaten paths, turning them into streams. People impatiently eyed the dense curtain of water hanging before their doors. How long was it going to last? The flickering light of the home fires shone faintly outside. The river Saken was swollen. Soon a torrent of muddy water would come pouring down the mountainside from the river's upper reaches. Then in the morning the people of the Silver Meadow hamlet would have to communicate with those of Nut Gully hamlet by means of baffling gestures . .

Kesso sat by the window staring out into the dark night. The light of the oil lamp fell on the glass, down which the rain trickled.

The house was silent. His father and sister were asleep. The dog sleeping beneath

the house whimpered, as though troubled by bad dreams.

The table was strewn with books. Fingers rustled their pages, turned them. Kesso could not sleep. He felt slightly depressed. His mind carried him back to a night like this at the front. They were awaiting orders to attack. It was stuffy in the dugout. On his despatch case lay a clean sheet of paper. It looked wonderfully white even in the dim, uncertain light. Kesso was writing a letter home, and in his mind's eye he could see it all—his family, the house, sombre Guagua, the snow-clad mountain peaks, the torrential river Saken. They were far removed from the front, thousands of miles away! As he folded the written sheet into a neat triangle in army fashion and wrote the address, he had fallen to dreaming that night of a quiet life in his native village, of the southern sunshine, of peace. Now at last he was at home! Here it was, the warmth of his paternal roof. But the quiet life—where was that? Evidently Kesso's was not the stuff that makes for a quiet life.

He took an exercise book and tore a double sheet out of the middle. He paced up and down the room. It was two hours past midnight. All Saken was asleep, people had long ago dreamed their seventh dream. Kesso was probably the only person who kept vigil that night in Saken. He could not sleep, memories had taken their hold upon him.

Some three years ago, the troop train in which Kesso was travelling had stopped near Moscow. It was a moonlit summer night. Somebody said that the Kremlin could be seen. Kesso climbed onto the roof of the car, which he found crowded with men. Everybody was looking in one direction, towards the Kremlin. But however much Kesso strained his eyes, he could see nothing, which must have been the case with all the others. But everybody was desperately eager to catch a glimpse of the crenellated walls of the Kremlin, and all were astonished at the fine visibility.

"It'll soon be daybreak, Comrades," somebody said. "And Comrade Stalin is awake. He once telephoned our HQ at five in the morning!"

The voice fell silent, and again all stared in reverent silence.

Kesso had waited until the men had descended from the roof, and then continued gazing for a long time in the direction of the Kremlin.

He sat down at the table, dipped his pen in the ink and wrote in a bold script: "To the Party organization of Saken village. At the present time . . ." After a minute's reflection he crossed out what he had written, crumpled up the paper and threw it under the table.

"What if I write to the district newspaper for help?" Kesso enquired of the silent walls.

The headline could be: "Utilization of local fertilizers." "Fertilizers," Konstantin's face seemed to float out of the darkness. "But are you quite sure about that cliff?" it seemed to ask.

After his talk with Konstantin he saw clearly that he couldn't do without an analysis—this was not a matter of some little vegetable plot, but of the whole collective farm lands. He would have to get expert advice.

"No, I can't do without help from town!"

Kesso began pacing the room again, trimmed the wick in the lamp. then, sitting down to the table once more, he bent resolutely over his paper and sat thus for a long time, perhaps until morning . .

~ 16 ~

Kesso woke up somewhat later that morning. As usual, he saw above him the time-darkened wooden ceiling and as usual let his eyes rove over it with interest. A merry flicker of light danced on the wall by his bed—the reflection of the first sunbeams.

The sky was serene and cloudless. The earth, drenched by the night's rain, dried quickly in the sunshine. All the elements were at peace, only the clamorous Saken rolled growling between its banks, and it seemed that its wrath would never be appeased.

That was settled. He would go to town, get there somehow despite the spring floods. Kesso stretched and yawned luxuriously. He took the sheet of paper from the table and scanned it. It dealt with several proposals for increasing crop yields.

Kesso crumpled up the paper and tossed it under the table. He had no more need of it. The sudden hostility to Konstantin that had burned up in him had ebbed away. After all, what ill had Konstantin done him? Made him see the thing in a more serious light, that was all. And now there was that sun-beam dancing before his eyes. And outside the window it was bright spring weather. Kesso stretched once more, and the bed creaked . .

Nina came in. She was carrying a cup of hot goat's milk.

"You're spoiling me," said Kesso.

Nina moved a chair up to the bed and placed the cup on it.

"Drink it in sips." Her eyes wandered over the table. "You've been writing? What about?"

Kesso did not answer. Nina tidied the papers, talking half to herself.

"You've been smoking a lot. The room's so thick with smoke you could cut it with a knife. 'Utilization of local fertilizers' . . . I see. That's about the cliff, I suppose. Father says it's a wild-geese chase. He laughs at it. But he defends you

before other people To the Party organization of Saken village' Kania and I were talking of you yesterday "

Kesso showed an ostentatious lack of interest in the latter item of news

"That Rashit's running after her all the time. . ."

The Sakeman's heart missed a beat Kesso gulped the milk angrily and scalded himself

"Hell!" he cried in a rage "I've scorched my throat!"

"Don't be in such a hurry . . . I don't like that Rashit fellow . . ."

"Damn that milk! Why don't you like him? Jealous?"

Nina snorted comically

"What's it got to do with me? It's you who should be jealous, not me"

"Well, it's got nothing to do with me either!"

For a man to conceal his feelings for the maid of his heart is an ancient custom in Saken No Sakenian will ever admit openly that he is in love, nor will he show his feelings before other people, carefully concealing them under an assumed indifference. This

is the accepted etiquette in the mountains, where it is held to be a particular sign of gallantry, it has also been the cause of countless misunderstandings, for such secrecy, is often fraught with the danger of 'young' men having a match stolen on them.

"Dad's waiting for you," said Nina, laying the papers aside "Are you going to Gudals this evening?"

✓Kesso remembered the invitation

"Yes, we're going

Yekup was sitting on the steps, massaging the small of his back, swaying rhythmically to and fro. He wore that look of blissful relaxation usually to be seen on his face when rainy weather gave place to days of sunshine. Kesso told his father of his intention to go to town to consult the district authorities. To his son's surprise, the old man not only raised no objection, but even approved of the idea.

"That's right," he said when he had finished his therapeutic manipulations. "Go and talk to them, let people see you. If I were you I'd take a sample of that cliff with me. Let the agronomists test it. . . A pity we're in such a Godforsaken place, otherwise

that cliff business would have been cleared up long ago . . .”

“Down there they’ve got all the fertilizers they need, it’s brought from thousands of miles away Not like here in Saken!”

“It seems this Saken of ours is out of luck,” said the old man. “I wonder what crazy fool got the idea of tossing us up here like a ball stranded on a roof?”

“As soon as the ploughing’s over, I’ll start for town,” said his son

“We’ll manage without you Everything’s shipshape in the team. Go as soon as the road’s open. . . .”

“The road’s open now,” came Nina’s voice from the kitchen. “Didn’t Rashit make it?”

The old man spat

“That cutthroat would make it astride a broom. . . .”

“Don’t worry, Father,” said Kesso. “I’ll get there somehow.”

Dusk was falling when Kesso and his father started out for Gudal’s home. The old man was wearing his best coat, his Kabardi-

man cloak and homespun woollen hood. He strode along with dignity, leaning on his stick. His son walked respectfully on his father's left hand, limping from habit rather than from any pain in his leg.

They were almost the first to arrive. Gudal's son Smel—a fine lad—met them at the gate. Smel had finished a course of beekeeping studies in town, and since then had worked in the collective farm apiary. For all his easy-going nature he could not get along with the bees (or rather, they with him) and his work somewhat irked him.

He stood aside respectfully to let the guests enter and closed the gate after them. Kesso saw wires slung across the yard.

'So you're tired of messing about with oil lamps?' he said, pointing to them.

"I should say so!" Smel replied with an embarrassed smile. "I was thinking that if anything came of it, I'd rig up installations for other people, for anybody who wants. I don't want any money for it. Let these machines start humming..."

Kesso wrung his hand.

"How old are you?" he asked. "Twenty-

three? That's not much And did your father help you?"

"The lad scratched the back of his ear.

"Well, you see," he stammered, "people sometimes don't take on to what is new. Not right away Father too When I started—well, he saw there was no stopping me . . . So what could he do? And to tell you the truth, he helped me a lot."

Yekup nudged him in the side

"Don't sin, my son," he said, "don't judge your father Everything that's done in the home comes from the father How else could it be? Everything has its laws!"

And the old man prodded Smel in the stomach The lad started back, then went into peals of laughter Kesso, looking at him, caught the infection Lastly, the old man himself succumbed—he shook with laughter and a fit of coughing

"Our sons are flying higher than we did—eh?" said Yekup to Gudal, who came hurrying down the stairs

Some women emerged from the kitchen.

One of them, tall and thin with hair prematurely greyed, came up to the guests

This was Gudal's wife

'Good day, Kamachich,' cried Yekup, greeting her ceremoniously "You never seem to get any older!"

"Nonsense, Yekup," the woman checked him, "unfortunately there are such things as mirrors"

But Yekup was not to be daunted. He was voluble in his assurances that Kamachich looked almost the same as when she was a girl. The old man was trying very hard to be gallant.

Kesso asked Smel all about the electric machine and how it worked

"Have you tried it out, before inviting people?" asked Kesso

"It'll work like a daisy," said Smel confidently "You wait and see!"

His black eyes strayed over Kesso's face and the latter had the momentary impression of a swift mountain goat standing slender, mercurial and indomitable before him. Smel leaned over confidentially to the guest (he was a whole head taller) and said:

"We've got such boys here—you could do wonders with 'em. Other folks will soon be having lights in their homes, you'll see. Everybody'll install a machine of his own."

"Don't you think we ought to fix up one big machine for all?" Kesso remarked.

"My word, you're right!" cried the lad, clapping his hands. "Just one big one—that'd be better. Eh?"

"Better, Smel, much better. We'll get it fixed up next year, and you'll be the chief mechanic. What'll you say to that?"

The lad was taken aback.

"Of course I'll agree. But for the time being this'll do." And he led Kesso off to see the installation.

The guests slowly gathered, Nikuala arriving the last.

"I'm sorry," he said, almost before he had crossed the threshold. "Very busy just now—the ploughing, plans and what not. . ." He wished to create a highly, businesslike impression.

The Sakenian doctor came with Nikuala. People who knew him immediately guessed that the doctor, hurrying to the opening, had

taken one drop too much (a habit which he claimed he had acquired here in Saken—"in this dump")

"Spiridon," Yekup said, half jokingly, wagging a finger at the doctor, "my back is waiting for you."

Spiridon laid his hand on his heart. "At your service," this ceremonious gesture said.

"It wouldn't hurt us to have another doctor," whispered Konstantin to Kesso. "When you're in the district centre, take up the question."

"Okay," answered Kesso. "I'll speak about it."

Meanwhile dusk had deepened and the oil lamp had to be lighted. Several wicks in bottles were brought out into the passage. The young men by the dam were completing the final preparations by torchlight.

Kamachich entertained the guests as best she could.

"My son says that the light'll burn here," she said, pointing to an electric bulb hanging from the ceiling.

Kesso went up to the hostess and took her hand.

"You don't believe it"

"It's hard to believe, my son"

"Wait a few minutes and you'll see."

The old men sat grouped in a corner. Yekup joined them. When Kamachich said "hard to believe" they turned to her.

"How's this, mistress, a venerable grey-headed old man with red cheeks like Santa Claus reproached her. 'Do you want to disgrace our Saken? If strangers, God forbid, heard you, what would they think?'"

Kamachich tried to defend herself. Then Yekup twitted her too.

"Fie, fie, Kamachich! What's there so surprising about it? Haven't you ever heard of the town light? It's like the moon—gives light but no warmth." Then, settling himself more comfortably in his seat, he continued: "I've never envied anybody in my life, my friends, but for some time I've envied the villages below us, across the passes. They have light. They're damned lucky. Managed to get it fixed before the war broke out. Some people get all the luck."

"War is war," said Konstantin, joining in the conversation. His calm, level voice instant-

ly drew the general attention. We'd have had light a long time ago if the war hadn't interfered. This road of ours is another nuisance—we're so hard to get at. . . If not for the war there'd certainly be an air service by now. Remember how a plane once landed here before the war?"

"Made of plywood, wasn't it?" Yekup said.

"That's nothing to laugh at," said Konstantin gravely. "It's canvas, but very strong. . . But never mind, we shall have light in a year or so, and aeroplanes will come out here, and then we'll get a road made." And he added not without relish, as though a particularly savoury dish had been placed before him: "An asphalted road. Eh?"

Yes, that would be a fine thing! The old men coughed and rubbed their hands in satisfaction. Silence reigned for some minutes in the room.

The courtyard had gradually filled with a curious crowd. Nikuala became excited. He hastily improvised a little conference. It was decided to give the occasion a public character. This was Konstantin's idea. Gudal stood bewildered. He said he wasn't prepared for

a feast on such a scale—look how many guests there were! Somebody volunteered to get several gallons of wine. Others in the company followed suit.

“While you’re speaking to the folks, we’ll fix everything up,” they declared.

The school headmaster Mushag (a fluent orator and dandy) took upon himself the role of master of ceremonies. A pair of fashionable fine-textured trousers tucked carelessly into his top boots testified to their owner’s casual indifference to his personal belongings (a feature which the Saken girls did not fail to note with admiration).

On Konstantin’s advice, he delivered a speech about the celebration in the Gudal house.

“Comrades!” Mushag wound up on a note of fervour. “People have for long past been enjoying the blessings of electricity. I want you to ponder deeply over today’s event. . . A Saken boy, who has grown to manhood under our eyes, has constructed a power unit all on his own. Had it not been for the war we should long ago have had light from a real power station. Today lights will glow in the homes of Gudal and his neighbours. But, Comrades, on

behalf of the Village Soviet I tell you that in 1948 we shall have our own... collective farm . power station!"

The closing words were drowned in applause and shouts of delight. The celebration was assuming a really grandiose scale. The answering speeches expressing gratitude to the Soviet Government were no less enthusiastically greeted.

"Long live Stalin!" rose a shout, and the whole crowded yard responded with a thunder of applause.

Suddenly an elderly man came running up the porch. He pulled his mountaineer's hood off his head and, waving it excitedly, shouted:

"Friends! Quiet, quiet, please!... Comrades! I make a proposal that the whole village pool together and build with its own hands this here electricity . . ."

"Electric station," Mushag prompted.

"Electric station!" the speaker repeated.

"Accepted!" roared the crowd, to Nikuala's consternation. But Konstantin set his mind at ease.

"It's a sensible decision," he said. "The right decision, if the people want it that way."

"What'll the district authorities say to it?"
Nikuala asked

"What can they have to say? We'll inform them of our decision and put through all the formalities in the proper way"

Smel and his companions were still busy at the dam. A blade-wheel was fitted to the end of a sloping trough, and from this a belt drive ran to the electric machine. Beside the latter stood a switchboard containing a knife switch and voltmeter. And that was all. The curious hung around marvelling at what they saw.

"Hey, Smel," shouted impatient idlers, of whom there is never any lack. "How things going?"

"Like a house on fire," laughed back Smel, his head disappearing in the ditch. He crawled about in the mud, cleaning the walls with a spade. Five minutes later he climbed out, black as a sweep.

"The devil!" cried the girls, pointing at him. "The devil himself!"

But the old men looked at Smel and wondered: he was a real learned man, that Smel, no doubt about it!

The culminating moment was approaching—two hefty fellows opened the dam and the water rushed down the trough. Mushag and Smel went up to the machine.

"Look up there!" yelled Kesso, pointing at the lamp.

The drive began to work. the machine whined thinly, and the lamp flared up like a miniature stroke of lightning, then went out.

"The belt's broken!" reported Mushag.

Adamur, who had been following Nikuala like a shadow, observed in an undertone, not without malice.

"A pity! The boys were in too great a hurry" and he grinned.

The women in the kitchen were working by firelight, since all the bottle-wicks had been carried off to the dam with the promise that they would be replaced by electric light—which, alas!—failed to appear.

In a quarter of an hour the belt was mended. Again the machine began to hum, and in the solemn silence the lights suddenly blazed up in the house, in the kitchen, in the passage, in the yard, over the gate, in the cow-

house and by the well. The light burned one minute, two minutes, five minutes.

Shouts arose. 'Smel' Where's Smel!'

"Three cheers for Smel' Toss him up!"

And the Sakenians were delighted to think that there lived among them such a smart lad by the name of Smel

Meanwhile the wine pitchers had long been going round and chunks of meat pie handed out, and many people were already in their cups, but the light was still burning

'And it'll go on burning until the Saken dries up!' quoth Kesso

Yes, my friends, that was a memorable night in Saken a glorious night!

* 17 *

The discovery of electricity can hardly have amazed the world more than this "town light," produced by one of their own village lads, had amazed the Sakenians. It need hardly be said that people marvelled less at the fact that such light existed than at the fact that it existed, of all places, in Saken. They felt as though somebody had picked up the village

bodily and deposited it many miles down in the lowlands, closer to town .

The peasants twisted Smel about and examined him from all sides with as much curiosity as though they had never seen him before. They kept asking

“It’s true then, you’ve done it yourself?”

Smel smiled good-humouredly. “What shall I say? Would you like me to help you fix up the same gadget?” he said, and, thrusting his hands into his pockets, he surveyed his interlocutor proudly

Gazing at the young man’s carriage with admiration the latter answered

“I daresay you’re capable of bigger things too I’m sure of it”

One morning ancient Shaangeri Kanba also came to look at the “town light” He asked them to close the door and draw the curtains

“Now show me that power,” he said

When the slightly flickering, yellow light filled the room, the old man went out without a word and made his way to the machine He stood beside it for a long time In his old Circassian coat with its silver trimmings, his

walnut staff in his hand, the hoaryheaded ancient looked like some prophet of old striving to solve the riddle of creation. Then, turning to Gudal, he said solemnly

"You are a real man."

He seated himself on a log, took out his tobacco pouch and laid out his flint and steel on his knee. His great-grandson, a boy of ten, frayed out the tinder, tore a piece off and gave it to the old man. Gudal squatted beside him.

Shaangeni slowly filled his old clay pipe. His lips, dry as ferns, moved silently.

"Who taught you this thing, Gudal?" he asked, nodding towards the dam.

Gudal rubbed his hands as people do before striking a good bargain.

"My son," he responded. "That boy of mine."

"How old is he, Gudal?"

"Twenty-three ..."

"You haven't married him yet?"

Gudal shook his head.

"Not yet. It's a bit early."

The old man began striking a spark from his flint. The operation was a long one, per-

formed with great zest, and when the tinder began to smoke he looked almost sorry

"Your boy," he said, pursuing his own thoughts which seemed to be escaping him "And who taught him it?"

"Well, how shall I say, Shaangeri? He went to school . . . He's clever at doing things. Once he went to town . . . saw all the wonders there . . . asked for money and bought all kinds of machines. He went there several times, till he'd dragged all that iron up here . . ."

"A miracle. God knows, a miracle!" the old man uttered thoughtfully, taking his pipe out of his mouth. How times have changed . . .

Shaangeri paused and fell to puffing at his pipe again. The grey smoke floated before his eyes. The old man was recalling his long life. They had been five brothers—the five Kanba lions. Shaangeri had been the youngest. The eldest, Daud, had been a splendid lad with a kindly heart. He died at the hand of a blood enemy, Prince Marshan's creature. He was shot through the back of the head. . . Peace to his ashes! He had had the strength of ten men! Never more had the mighty green moun-

tains seen his like, aye, never more! . . . And the second one too, a handsome lad, had been sent to Siberia because of some nobleman's horse, and had never come back. They said he was innocent, but he pined away, melted like wax in captivity. Two other brothers, both as brave lads as any you could look for, had had a weakness for drink. They were always invited to feasts and celebrations and placed at the head of the table to act as *tamada*. Wine killed those two—they got water in the stomach. And their mother had always told them—don't drink! So they perished too—and what fine men they had been! Well, and Shaangeri himself? He could knock a bull senseless with a blow of his fist, his strength was prodigious. Only say the word and he'd have gone and got a firebrand out of hell. And what had he done in his lifetime? To what purpose had he lived a century and a half?

"Ah, Gudal, Gudal," whispered the old man, "the pity of it, the pity of it .

"What is it, Shaangeri?"

* A sort of master of ceremonies, the toaster

"My life, Gudal The pity of it, the pity . . . Here in my heart is a gnawing pain It is envy, a craving for what is good But you can't understand . . . Hearken to my words Here I have lived, lived a lifetime, dreaming of lasting the cup of happiness, just the least bit of happiness And now when the end is near I see it, that cup of happiness. . . But I no longer have the strength to grasp it, my arm is weak, it will not reach out . . ."

The old man heaved a sigh and rose to his feet He took his leave of Gudal and shambled off leaning on his great-grandson's arm.

Kesso met him on the road.

"Well?" the young man said "Did you like it at Gudal's?"

Shaangeri cupped his hand over his eyes

"Is that you?" he asked hoarsely "Karaman's grandson? . . . The picture of your grandfather, the very image . . ." And he wanted to continue on his way.

'One moment . . . please. . . .' Kesso diffidently barred the old man's way "Won't you come in to us?"

"I can't," said the old man with a shake of the head. "I must hasten home to think things

over at leisure You understand? This
Gudal's grandfather He was a qucer
fellow . . . And his grandson takes after him.
What?"

Kesso hastened to put his question

"I want to ask you what you know about
the grey cliff behind our house?"

"The cliff?"

"That one on Adamur's land—the land
that used to be Adamur's . . ."

"What Adamur is that? Whose son is he?"

The old man's eyes narrowed. He was breathing
heavily, as though in place of lungs he
had torn blacksmith's bellows. "I know many
cliffs. Would you like me to teach you how
to make gunpowder? Many is the time I
have done it. Black mountain rock, hen
droppings and charcoal . . . So help me God!"

The old man paused to draw his breath.
Seizing the opportunity, Kesso hastened to
put another question to him.

"What has been the best maize yield in
Saken?"

"A hundred!" said the old man with a toss
of the head. "A hundred poods—that's all. In
the best year. . . . You understand?"

‘ So you’ve never heard anything about the cliff?’

The old man seemed to be goading his memory, his lips stirred ceaselessly

“I mind me,” he said at last, stroking his beard with trembling fingers ‘ Gudal’s grandfather, God grant that I’m not mistaken, he was always making strange contraptions . He hobnobbed here with an official . To be sure! Folks said they were doing something with a cliff . It’s probably just a tale, though . But you come to me, I’ll teach you to make gunpowder . I used to make it myself. Ugh, time was . ” And the old man, after searching his memory and finding nothing worthy to suit the moment, gave the young man his hand

“Come and see me, my son,” he said

Kesso stared after the old man until he had disappeared from sight . It was as though the century-long history of Saken was passing, a history which had given the world no few sturdy men of amazingly long life . A pity that they had all disappeared like shadows on the ground, melted into the darkness

In the unanimous opinion of the Sakenians, spring that year had begun under remarkable auspices. Judge for yourself: the surprisingly early advent of warm weather, all this talk about the miraculous cliff, Gudal's electric light—were these not events of extraordinary interest? Was it surprising that the village was attuned to a strange expectant mood? It seemed as though every new day must bring something new and astounding.

But there existed in Saken a sceptic who, as he himself admitted at Adamur's bar, shared neither the enthusiasm of the Sakenians nor their astonished "oh's" and "ah's" in connection with current events. He certainly possessed no Sakenian heart! With regard to Gudal's light, for instance, he remarked that he had seen a thing or two in his day that threw these trifles into the shade, and raising his glass broke out into a rollicking limerick. The sceptic, as you see, was by no means tender of Sakenian feelings, nor did he have qualms about incurring Sakenian censure. That sceptic

tic, as you have already probably guessed, was Rashit

Of course, there was nothing to prevent him having his ears boxed by some hothead for such brazen contempt of his fellow villagers. But Rashit undoubtedly possessed an irresistible charm, for which much was forgiven him. Besides, his hands, the hands of a wonderful shoemaker, had won him the hearts of all Saken's women. His workmanship was beyond reproach and criticism. He made both ladies' shoes and top boots of soft leather which fitted the leg like a silk stocking.

But he had the devil's own truculence and swagger!

He thought nothing of riding his horse up the rickety steps on to somebody's porch, taking a back shot at an apple over his shoulder and hitting it, or drinking a whole company under the table. No wonder folks more ripe in years and mature in experience said if he got enough rope he would hang himself yet. But Rashit merely laughed up his sleeve, licked his chops and ogled the girls.

At the moment he was cautiously approaching a fence near the spot where the creak-

ing crane-handle of a well arched over the cool surface of the water. Leaning over the fence, his eyes bored into the light square of the doorway fifty paces away, while he hummed a song.

He had not been waiting five minutes when a woman came down the porch carrying buckets. With a shout to the whining dogs, she made her way towards the well. The chain had hardly begun to rattle on the roller when a suave voice called

“Kama . . .”

The rattle stopped

“Who’s that?”

“It’s me, Rashit, came from the other side of the fence. In proof of his words, this lady-killer of ours prepared to leap over the fence.

“You mustn’t,” Kama checked him, running up to the fence. This “you mustn’t” imparted a sort of intimate character to the unexpected visit. At any rate, Rashit got the impression that his appearance had not met with any serious rebuff. He refrained nevertheless from any further advances, and, jumping down gracefully, deposited his body in its former place.

"Kama," said Rashit, summoning up from his throat the tenderest of notes "How are you getting on, Kama?"

Kama, when she had regained her composure, began talking with that careless ease of manner in which Saken women are adepts (and which, as far as we know, is not scorned by their sisters in other parts of the world)

"How kind of you to ask!" said Kama, amused "Weren't you afraid of the dark?"

"Don't you know, Kama, that I stand by your house every night?"

"No, I don't"

"I stand on this spot for hours at a time!" This was such an inspired lie that Rashit almost believed it himself

"You shouldn't," said Kama "What for? What would people think if they saw you?"

"What do I care what people think?" burst out Rashit, but he immediately regretted his words.

"In that case—goodbye!" Kama turned the roller with a rumble, the chain rattled, and water rushed noisily into the bucket.

"Wait a minute, Kama," pleaded Rashit. "I'll jump over if you don't. You hear me?"

The threat had its effect. Kama returned to the fence.

"That wasn't what I wanted to say. . ."
Rashit lowered his voice to a swift whisper. . .
"Don't scold me, don't be angry. I love you . . ."

"Rashit!"

"Yes," the young man continued, "it's true, I love you."

Kama felt it her duty to answer him honestly, without evasion

"Poor boy," she said, touched by the passionate declaration "I understand But it's no good."

"Kama, what's the matter? Why?"

Did Rashit really love Kama as ardently as might appear? Or was it other factors that had done their work? Was it her aloofness that had provoked the Sakeman lady-killer? We must leave that unanswered—it may have been either way or both, for this is a true story of events in Saken, and we have no desire to embellish it

"First of all . . ." but Kama decided to leave item number one alone and went on to the next. . . . "And secondly," she continued after

a slight pause, 'it's early to think of such things . . I want to study ."

"Study?!" the young man cried in astonishment. "But haven't you been to school?"

"Seven classes, Rashit, only seven classes. Haven't you ever thought of agricultural college?"

"No, never," Rashit admitted

"But I've thought about it a lot," said Kama soberly. "Learning is light, ignorance is darkness."

Rashit burst out laughing. Her excuse struck him as very thin. "Playing a deep game," he thought, "trying to put a higher value on herself."

"There's something else here. Study's got nothing to do with it! I'm sure that half-baked agronomist Kesso is at the bottom of it. Isn't it that crackbrain who's turned your head?" And he rained down mockery on Kesso, trying in every way to lower him in the girl's eyes.

"Is that all?" said Kama quietly, after hearing him out.

"Yes."

"Goodbye!" And she turned toward the house.

The morning of the next day was bleak and cold. Fine threads linked heaven and earth. Through the dense rain an early guest made his way to Yekup's house. The master of the house met Adamur on the threshold and invited him in to dry and warm himself by the fire.

"Where's Kesso?" Adamur asked as he seated himself.

"Here I am," the young man replied, coming into the kitchen.

"Winter has returned," said Adamur. "It's very bad for the health—chill weather after the heat, you know."

"Bring us glasses, daughter," said Yekup, turning to Nina. "In weather like this, vodka's the best remedy against a chill. I prefer elderberry vodka, eh?"

"Sure, Yekup, elderberry vodka, only strong. It cures rheumatism and whips up the blood."

Adamur was given the opportunity of testing the strength of the elderberry vodka and its curative properties. By way of snacks they

ate cold hominy and roasted cheese that melted over the fire like butter

Truth to say, Kesso was in no drinking mood But Saken's law of hospitality made no allowances To sit and drink with a guest with the most carefree men even when, as the saying goes, you've got a mouthful of cares, was the first duty of a host To entertain a guest was work, just like any other work (that is how we Sakenians see it)

By the way, Kesso, Adamur suddenly said in a casual sort of way, "how's your project going?"

"What project?"

"I heard you're going to tear down the cliff to make medicine for the fields

Kesso muttered a vague something by way of reply He threw more wood onto the fire, and a thousand sparks shot up to the smoke-blackened ceiling

"Well, why not, it's a good idea. It's a fine cliff, a gold mine We guarded it like the apple of our eye," Adamur lied "To be sure! Don't I remember my father saying: 'Look after it, it's a treasure, not a cliff!' It stands on our land, you know To be sure!"

The hint about the cliff's location made the hosts prick up their ears

"I can imagine the profits you'll make, dear friends," Adamu went on.

"Profits? ' Kesso repeated irritably "What profits? And why us?"

"Why, of course! It's your idea, your undertaking, isn't it? So the profits'll be yours too. Now if you were to sell it, say, by the kilogram, or the pood—you'll make thousands out of it. And practically without any effort! Easy work. Just break pieces off with a pickaxe and weigh 'em out. And even if you can't sell it yourself, they're sure to give you a good prize for it in town. Such a find as that!"

Yekup listened, but could not understand what it was all about. What profits? What pieces? Meanwhile Adamu, his eyes closed, was reckoning up the rubles and kopeks with breath-taking results. His calculations over, Adamu lauded to the skies the well-known probability of the Muba clan and expressed his advance admiration of Yekup's and Kesso's disinterestedness.

"Thank you, thank you," said the flattered host.

But Kesso apparently was none too pleased with all these blandishments. He took a more practical view of the matter

"What do you want of me?" he asked point-blank.

Adamur was pleased at this turn. Being a man of commerce he liked a businesslike approach

"You know, dear folks," he began blandly, "I'm not a stranger in this home. We are almost as good as blood relations. To be sure we are! I'm not a stranger to you, so naturally you're not strangers to me. I know that you will never covet my property and you won't take the bread out of my mouth."

The old man nodded in approbation.

"And I swear by this pie I am eating that you can expect the same from me. To be sure! A tree draws strength from its roots, a man from his friends. As you know, that whole area (Adamur made a sweeping movement with his right hand) "belongs . . . or rather, belonged . . . to me . . . A long time ago, it's true. I lost a good deal. But that's not the point, dear folks. The old people are still here. They should remember what belonged to whom. In

justice the profits from the cliff should not pass me by either That is how I look at it True, I am not a man of very great wisdom, but folks cleverer than I saw the same. In a word, I rely on you Let us share, make a fair division "

A depressing silence ensued The old man busily stirred the embers in the fire, trying to make it blaze up Kesso furiously turned his glass in his hands Indignation choked all utterance.

"You're crazy, he exploded at last ' Making a proposal like that in this day and age! I don't understand! I refuse to understand! If my project turns out all right it'll be a good thing for the whole collective farm What's our family and blood relations got to do with it? Have you been asleep, or what? I can imagine a man talking like that who'd been sleeping for thirty years, not less! Times have changed Adamur, and so have people! And even Saken's not what it used to be!"

Kesso rushed out of the kitchen, slamming the door

"Have you been quarrelling?" Nina asked her brother.

‘Adamur’s demanding his share for the cliff!’

“He’s crazy! What share?”

“Ask him yourself. He’s heard about the fertilizer and thought he could milk us like some dumb cow. Started remembering the old days, the idiot!”

Kesso put on his coat and sped across the broad yard, throwing out to his sister in passing, ‘I’m going to the Soviet.’ He seethed all the way as he thought of Adamur’s stupid proposal.

There was nobody in the Soviet. Kesso opened the door of the adjoining reading room. There he found Konstantin and the headmaster Mushag.

‘Come over here, I need you,’ Konstantin called to Kesso. ‘Sit down. Just a minute.’ He resumed his talk with the headmaster: ‘I think, Mushag, that a good lecture and then an amateur concert by the school children wouldn’t be a bad thing.’

“I agree,” said Mushag, jotting something down in a notebook.

“What’s it all about?” asked Kesso, moving up.

Konstantin was plainly worried, rubbing alternately his forehead and temples

"The people are getting upset, you understand. They say the rain'll never stop, we shan't be able to sow, there'll be no harvest. Some of the old folks are beginning to whisper about 'a visitation of God'. We've got to explain things to them. A lecture on, say, rain as a natural phenomenon."

Mushag promised to arrange an excellent evening the next Sunday. He would deliver the lecture himself, and after it there would be a concert by the school choir.

"Before I forget it, Mushag, where's your radio set?"

"It's not working. The accumulator ran down long ago."

"Can't you use Gudal's power station to recharge it?" Kesso put in.

Mushag struck his forehead. "Why, of course! I never thought of that! Of course I can. It's direct current—just the thing I need!"

"Then here's a commission for you, Mushag: get that set working and every morning take down the weather forecast and pin it up on the school door. Get me? Let the people

know the hows and whys of it all 'There's got to be a working radio set in the Village Soviet '

Mushag promised to see to his set.

"Well, and how are things going with you, Kesso?"

"Nothing much to boast of, Konstantin. So far it's only the rain target that's being topped. But we've managed to plough a good bit. . . . I want to slip away to town. What do you say to it?"

' Good boy. I was going to suggest it, but you got in first. The trouble is we sit here and—frankly speaking—there's a lot we don't know. Take a sample of that cliff with you, get advice—consider it a commission from the Party group here. Right? That's good, then. When you get back, you'll report the results at a meeting. If necessary, you'll have help. We won't let you down. '

There was a hint of patronage in Konstantin's deep-chested voice, but he spoke with firm confidence and Kesso was ready to forgive any intonation.

Kesso pulled up his top boots.

"Well, I'll be off to town, then . . ." he said.

"Fine. By the way, bring the newspapers with reports of the Party plenum."

They went out onto the porch. It was still raining—a fine, persistent rain, the kind that can go on for ever. A low rumble came from the river: the Saken was tossing restlessly on its stony bed. Suddenly the lightning flashed close by, immediately followed by a clap of thunder. The deep sound rolled solemnly through the gorges, down the mountain sides, over the peaks veiled in a fine mist of rain, and disappearing somewhere across the passes, was swallowed up in the countless deep ravines.

"Hear that?—thunder!" said Konstantin.
"That means this weather won't last long."
And he led the way down the steps.

Sunday was a fine day. Yet the previous evening the sky had looked hopelessly dismal, bleak and glowering. But evidently the dose of water measured off by nature had run out, and the sun had no choice but to shine out again in the greenish sky.

Early in the morning, weather bulletins were pinned on the wall of the Village Soviet and the school door. They informed the Sakenians that the world was bathing in the sun's rays. The sun was beginning to emanate warmth even in Archangel and Krasnoyarsk. Only in Tashkent, for some reason, was rain falling. People read the bulletins and rejoiced. In a word, sunny weather over a major part of the Soviet Union gladdened Sakenian hearts.

Kesso, delighting in the turn the weather had taken, was meanwhile making preparations for his long trail. He put on warm clothes, slung a heavy knapsack on his back, armed himself with an alpenstock, took ceremonial leave of his family and instead of beginning the climb, descended to the spring, where Kama was waiting for him.

We shall spare the reader a description of this meeting between the young people and of all the tender words then spoken. Suffice it to say that the leave-taking bade fair to last a very long time.

"Good luck to you, dearest. So long," said Kama at last.

"Farewell," cried the young man without

thinking 'The unfortunate word reduced the girl to the verge of tears

"Why farewell?"

'So long," he corrected himself.

'But why did you say farewell?"

Darling, I just didn't think, it slipped out . Of course there's no reason for us to say farewell '

The girl dropped her hands sadly And again, barely audibly, she asked

"But why did you say farewell? '

"Oh, forget it Forgive me I'll think of you, dream of you all the way '

"In town too?"

"In town too ."

They parted. He strode off with a firm step, limping very slightly. She stood there barely able to suppress her sobs

21

In the wing adjoining the shop (the favourite nook of Saken's revellers) Adamur was entertaining guests—Rashit, Anton and a lanky hulk of a fellow called Yenik. The latter's appearance in Saken generally preceded some ex-

traordinary event—a fact which any observant person might easily have established had he wished to. He lived at Miramba hamlet, lived unobtrusively—quieter than water and lower than grass, as the saying goes. At times he yielded to an irresistible urge which drove him to the performance of what he considered “heroic” deeds. At such times he would undergo a complete transformation and slip away from the hamlet. At any rate, judging by the way he held his capacious wineglass, one might safely conclude that he was a lad of parts, as they say.

Rasht sat musing. He drank in silence, sipping his wine at frequent intervals, as though unable to quench his thirst.

Anton sat wiggling on a packing case, awaiting his turn to drain the glass. Opposite him sat Adamur. He had locked up the shop from inside not to be disturbed in his enjoyment of several hours’ convivial company.

A toast had just been drunk to friendship among “real men.” Adamur refilled the glass and clicked his tongue as a sign that a fresh toast was about to be made. .

"Dear friends," he said, "we have in our midst a good man, I might say, one of the best. He would not grudge his life for a paler . . . he loves his friends, and his friends think a lot of him . . . Now this lad has planned a real man's undertaking. Well, we—his friends—say 'good!'" With which he kissed Rashit.

"You can always tell a real man," said Anton in a businesslike tone. "Saken will remember you, Rashit!"

"Especially a certain person in Saken, Adamur remarked not without satisfaction.

Anton suddenly flew into a rage. He thumped the improvised table with his fist and nearly upset the snacks.

"I'm a mild enough person," he mumbled thickly, "but I have one rule. I hate upstarts. Let Kesso march off to town, he'll have good news waiting for him when he gets back!"

The drunken company guffawed. Anton continued:

"Kesso'll get what's coming to him. Kama's not for an impudent fellow like him!"

"They say— Adamu beckoned the others closer for a confidential disclosure. "They say Kesso's taken a bag with him to town"

"What bag?" Yenik pricked up his ears
'A bag full of valuable stuff."

"But what's in it?" asked Yenik.

"Earth!" Adamu shook with laughter

"What earth?"

Rashit and Anton explained to the lanky fellow what earth they were talking about—a chunk of that daft cliff!

"And he's lugging that for over a hundred kilometres?"

"Yes "

"Is he crazy?"

"He has the cheek to try to teach other people too "

"Is he going to sell the earth in town, or what?"

"He wants to sell the whole cliff, sight unseen, as they say."

"He's not so daft," the lanky one remarked.

Then followed a businesslike discussion of the planned undertaking

Yenik unfolded his plan On her way home the girl usually passed Marten's Lair A man

with horses would be lying in wait for her there. To bundle her up in a cloak would be a matter of seconds. And then—to horse! And that evening, whether she liked it or not, she would be Raslut's wife.

"She won't put up a fight, will she?" asked Adamur, just to make sure. And to his surprise he heard in reply a rather inarticulate mumbling sound from the "bridegroom." This somewhat disconcerted the shop manager.

"What?" he cried. "She'd flout a lad like that?"

Anton interrupted him.

"You're crazy," he said. "Even if it's against her will, what does it matter? Just think a moment—once she's been kidnapped, who's going to look at her afterwards? People won't bother their heads about the why and wherefore. Kidnapped—an end to it. No, good friends, she'll be trapped. Snap! And the mousetrap's sprung. That's how it's always been, since time immemorial!"

"Quite right," Adamur agreed. "She'll be caught. But I don't think things'll go as far as that. What do you say, Rashit?"

Raslut made no reply, and the plotters

resumed the discussion of their plan and its possible consequences.

When the friends came out of their lan and took a breath of Saken's evening air, they fell into a merry mood. And, as it made not the slightest difference to them where they went, their legs propelled them to the school where lights were shining in the windows (seeing that it was close by, just across the road).

"Oh, they're handing out enlightenment here this evening. Let's go in and listen to the lecture," Anton suggested with sarcasm.

"I'm game to go anywhere—to hell, if you like!" Adamur responded, and violently pushed open the gate leading into the school courtyard. It crackled under his hand like a chicken's wing roasted red on a spit.

The courtyard was empty. Everybody was in the hall, at the far end of which a stand had been arranged. Light was provided by several oil lamps. One of them stood on the platform, from where Mushlag was delivering a lecture. He was telling the audience about the mysteries of creation, about the forces of nature operating throughout the cosmos as a single law, about atmospheric phenomena and such things.

The lanky one muttered

"He speaks well—if he's not lying "

The front row was occupied by old men, all of whom, as though by special arrangement, were resting their chins on their sticks

The young "artists" of the evening, burning with impatience to display their talent, were peeping from behind the wings. The audience had been told that after the lecture a play by a local author would be performed.

At the conclusion of his speech—applauded by all present—Mushag asked whether everything was clear. Did anybody wish to say anything?

Silence

"Are there any questions?" Mushag asked

A schoolboy sitting in the middle rows raised his hand

"May I?" he asked timidly. "How many kilometres is it from the earth to the moon?"

"About four hundred thousand," was the answer

The boy, satisfied, sat down, and immediately a buzzing began around him. His comrades were heatedly arguing about something.

The front rows accepted the director's definitive answer with frank scepticism

"My son," an old voice hoarsely spoke up. "if I tell my wife what you said" (laughter in the hall) "she will immediately ask who measured it."

The speaker's explanation lasted about fifteen minutes, but it did not seem to fully convince the sceptics

"Last year," objected the same voice, "the plot of land near my house was measured three times and every time the figures were different"

Yenik suddenly jumped up and asked for the floor

"Why is there dew on the ground when the sky's clear?" he asked

Rashit tugged the skirt of his coat, trying to make him sit down Yenik stood, listening to what the lecturer had to say, then coughed importantly, satisfied with the answer

After all meteorological problems had been duly disposed of, the curtain was rung down and the whole room seemed to get up and shake itself, what with the noise and clatter and talking, coughing and sneezing.

Mushag climbed down from the stage and went in search of Konstantin

"How was the lecture?" he asked him, mopping his perspiring forehead with his handkerchief.

"Splendid," Konstantin replied "Useful thing."

Mushag, highly pleased with this praise, hurried behind the scenes to tell them to raise the curtain again—and the play began.

It would take too long to describe all the difficulties Kesso Muba had to overcome on his journey. This would provide material for a whole novel. To a lover of nature incidentally interested in the physical phenomena of falling bodies, Kesso's journey would appear a remarkable one. He might possibly even wish to undertake a similar journey for his own pleasure. But here we must make a reservation. Anybody who wishes to go to Saken in July or August loses half the entertainment which awaits him at other seasons. Bear in mind

that Kesso went to town at the beginning of April, and in the mountains this is not considered to be a summer month. To obtain a really full impression one should start out for Saken in the spring or autumn. Then all the nine passes and eight mountain streams barring his path will show the curious traveller what they are really capable of. In brief, if you have no doubt of the happy outcome of your adventure, I would advise you to invite some friends with you whom you might wish to afford a very sure if not very refined way of amusing themselves. You may be quite certain that the gay company will receive so many bruises and dislocations, and in such comical ways, that those who will have chanced to escape injury will split their sides with laughter.

One might say that Saken was out of luck when the world was created. If we can believe the geologists who claim that all these parts were once under the sea, we can only surmise that there must have been a gigantic vortex exactly over Saken which played havoc with the bit of sea bed that providence had intended for the Sakenians as their domicile.

Saken travellers describe the road there (or from there) more or less in this way.

"My friends!" (this is followed by a lengthy pause—a man must have a smoke, after all)

"The road's like one out of a fairy tale, believe me. First you go along an exceedingly narrow footpath, to the left of which is a precipice and to the right a sheer cliff. Then you pass across a razor's edge, and that razor's a mile long—that's Wolf's Jaw. Then you become a ropewalker—that's Bear's Fang. After you've counted the teeth of a dozen or so wild beasts, you find yourself in Devil's Hole—a bowl half a mile deep which only lacks a furnace and sinners to make it a real hell. When you've passed Hare's Burrow and Squirrel's Lip, you tumble out, if God wills it, into Wild Ox Meadow. No, you don't just get there, you tumble into it, for nobody has yet descended the greasy, clayey slope on his own feet. Devil's Bridge turns you temporarily into a monkey, and then . . ."

The stories of these daring travellers strike terror into your heart and freeze your blood.

And so, summon your imagination to your aid and try to visualize a journey from Saken to

town according to your best conceptions of the fantastic, and at the end of your imaginary journey you will discover Kesso Muba by a puddle that never dries up, a puddle that has been an eyesore to the suburban dwellers for many years. But Kesso was overjoyed to find it where it should be. How else could he have washed his boots? Or his rubber raincoat smeared all over with reddish mud? Or his bag? That too had had a rough time and needed sprucing up no less than its owner.

The warm spring sunshine, the wonderfully bright day, the fragrance of fresh new greenery, the girls in their gay frocks, young men in open shirts, the most sanguine of hopes—was not all this enough to make a young man spin brightly coloured dreams and discover a hitherto unsuspected predilection for the vocal art?

Kesso strode along, his boots clicking on the paved roadway, and his lips whispering rhythmic lines, while a song formed in his head.

Over green mountains I walk
Seeking the trace of your feet,
I wander through gorges to seek
Did you chance to pass by, my sweet

Straight over the mountains my road,
By precipitous paths I go
But your tracks are not there
And you are not there,
Yet I feel you are near, and I know

People passed him by All seemed to be laughing Perhaps they had guessed what news the young mountaineer was bringing? Kesso mentally delivered a passionate speech in defence of an undertaking whose importance life itself had indicated. He quickened his pace and his boots struck the pavement more sharply, as though the whole of Saken village had come to town

Kesso walked along the old familiar streets and could not recognize them It was five years since he had left this town with the other mobilized men to go to the front

Five years of war seemed to have turned the whole world inside out. It had been hard to believe that the war-scarred countryside could ever revive. Could the shrivelled dandelion ever bloom again? Could the pear tree in a quiet Ukrainian orchard that a shell had split asunder ever be resurrected? And the chimneys standing desolate in the steppes?

When would they smoke again? Would they? .

But what was the astonishment of the soldiers, Kesso's friends, when they returned home along the beaten paths of war. For it transpired that dandelions could live again, pear trees put forth fresh flowers and chimneys smoke once more. New villages were springing up, new houses.

In five years of war one expected the town, albeit it was in the rear, to have grown older, smoke-stained and shabby. People had had other things to think of. But Kesso was walking along asphalted streets, under the shade of palms and laurels that had not been there before. There were beds of flowers. Here and there new buildings. Steamrollers stood about in the side streets like bullocks warming themselves in the sun. It was a town grown younger, bathed in the glory of spring sunshine and warmth that greeted the mountaineer.

A bootblack was standing at a street corner, and Kesso decided to get his boots polished. Close by was a barber shop—it would do no harm to have a shave!

The barber painstakingly lathered the mountaineer's weather-beaten face and squinted out of the corner of his eye at the bag left lying by the door.

"I suppose that's cheese?" the barber enquired

"No, earth, Kesso answered, swallowing a goodly portion of soapsuds

"Earth? The razor swished deftly over the shop, and the barber winked, looking into the mirror as much as to say—we understand a joke too

"Yes, earth, Kesso repeated with vigour "Don't you believe it?"

The barber's face, adorned with an amazing moustache (one expected it to take wing at any moment and fly away like a bird) registered a look of complete satisfaction

"Must be very valuable," he hazarded

"Very. It gives a good harvest "

The barber could not resist the temptation of opening the bag. Peeping in, he pulled a wry face: it really was earth!

At the entrance of the agricultural department Kesso was nearly knocked off his feet. An employee in horn-rimmed spectacles with a folder of papers under his arm charged into him and rushed on without even an apology.

In a long corridor people were hurrying to and fro. Doors were precipitately opened and closed. There was the rattle of typewriters and the noise of calculating machines being energetically manipulated. Kesso found the general office.

"Where can I see the chief agronomist?"

Kesso tried to make his voice sound as polite as possible. There was a docile, almost ingratiating look in his eyes. He did not dare set the bag down on the floor. He had cause enough to feel shy! Before him sat a very busy secretary. Now she would reach for the telephone, now for the blotter, then rummage in the table drawer looking for the rubber stamp. She was manifestly insensible to requests, entreaties or threats. Occasionally she would jump up and run into the next room,

throw a word to somebody and shrug her shoulders in annoyance. She talked in a sharp staccato, like a telephone bell, and paid not the slightest attention to Kesso. When she did deign to notice him at last—after the young mountaineer had been hanging about in front of her for at least half an hour, she snapped.

“Sit down.”

“Thank you, but I’m in a great hurry. I want to see the chief agronomist.”

“He’s busy and he’s not seeing anybody today,” the secretary answered in a tone of finality.

Their eyes met and held like two rapiers—a rapier of steel and a rapier of lead. And the leaden rapier (Kesso’s, of course) yielded, bent, capitulated.

“I beg your pardon,” he repeated in the same diffident voice. “But it’s absolutely necessary for me to see him.”

The secretary sharply drew down the fork of her brows. The telephone rang and she became oblivious of the visitor.

“Now get this,” she shouted into the telephone, “that bulletin goes out today, and I

don't want to get a reprimand because of you. Is that clear?" and she banged down the receiver.

Kesso cast off politeness as a useless weapon and growled.

"I'm asking you where can I see the chief agronomist."

The secretary drew a deep breath as though she had just come out of a dive.

"Oh, you've chosen such a bad time," she drawled. "Can't you understand, Comrade, it's bulletin day today!"

"So what of it?"

"What of it?" the secretary repeated in amazement "Today we're all terribly busy."

She reached out again for the telephone Kesso was sorely tempted to give her a bit of his mind in army fashion, but thought better of it, and went down the long corridor to seek out the chief agronomist himself. The second door on the right led to his office. Kesso opened it and walked in.

The agronomist was sitting at a large oak table. Spread out before him was a huge sheet of paper made of several pieces pasted

together. The ends hung down over the table like a cloth. The agronomist was turning the handle of a calculating machine and entering figures in different columns.

"Bulletin day today," he said quietly but firmly. "I'm seeing nobody."

Kesso had the impression that the agronomist was talking to somebody else—in any case, not to him.

"First of all, good morning," said Kesso brightly.

The agronomist heaved a deep sigh and muttered something under his breath. Without waiting for an invitation Kesso sat down before the table and placed his heavy bag on the floor.

"I'm from Saken . . ." Kesso began, expecting the agronomist to be flabbergasted by the arrival of such an unusual guest.

"I've no time to talk to you today."

"But that's just what I've come for. It's a very interesting business, an exciting business. . . ."

"I'm excited enough as it is," said the agronomist, rubbing out a wrong figure on his sheet.

Kesso glanced at the sheet of paper at which the agronomist had probably been plugging away for several days, poisoning his own life and the lives of those about him. Kesso looked at the figures and felt dizzy. He threw his half-smoked cigarette out of the window

The telephone rang.

The agronomist was obviously in a fretful temper, and the telephone seemed to shatter the last vestiges of his equanimity.

"Yes, yes, come tomorrow, or better on Monday," he shouted at somebody. "I can't see anyone today, it's out of the question!"

Kesso slung his bag over his shoulder and went out, slamming the door with a vehemence that set the windowpanes quivering.

He plodded along the pavement with a feeling of bitter resentment in his heart. The bag seemed three times as heavy. And the sun was no longer pleasantly warm, it was broiling. In short, the lad's spirits had been thoroughly dashed

The building of the Party district committee was close by the seashore. Against the blue background of the sea and sky the white-washed house looked like the sail of a ship.

Kesso mounted to the second floor and cautiously opened a door upholstered in black oilcloth. On it was a sign: 'Waiting room, first secretary.'

In the room were several people, talking in low voices. On the right, close to the door, sat a pale, grey-eyed girl. She was going through the mail, sorting out the papers in separate folders.

Kesso carefully deposited his bag in a corner and went up to the girl, trying hard not to make a noise with his boots.

"May I see the secretary?"

"Sit down, Comrade. You want to see Alexander Ivanovich?"

"Yes, the first secretary."

"Sit down."

Kesso moved a chair to the table. The girl looked at him closely. Involuntarily he smiled.

Her severe, businesslike expression sat so incongruously on her youthful face

"What is your business?" asked the girl.

Her voice was amazingly reminiscent of that other's in Saken, and Kesso suddenly felt calm and happy, as though he had dropped in to see a good friend. He smiled engagingly. The girl asked in embarrassment:

"What are you laughing at?"

"I'm sorry," said Kesso. "It was just something you reminded me of."

The secretary made a note on a letter in red pencil

"Good or bad?"

"Oh, no, not bad," protested Kesso warmly. "How could you remind me of anything bad . . ."

"Hush, not so loud," she checked him gently, though trying to maintain an official tone. "Tell me your business. What organization are you from?"

"I've just come to town."

"Where from?"

"From Saken."

"Oh, from Saken? You don't say!" The girl pushed all her papers aside. "What a rare visitor!"

"Well, you see, I had to . . ."

"There's a whole pile of papers waiting for you, I'll just run in to the general office and tell them the good news."

The secretary jumped up from the table and disappeared through the door. A bell rang somewhere under the ceiling. It rang a second time—long and insistently. Kesso got up to look for the secretary and ran into her in the doorway.

"You're wanted," he said.

The girl fussed about the table, looking for her notebook.

"I'll tell the secretary you're here. What is your name?" she said in a swift patter.

"Kesso Mirba."

"From Saken," the girl added and disappeared through the door of the private office. A moment later she reappeared.

"Comrade Mirba!"

"Here!" Kesso tapped out army style.

"Alexander Ivanovich" (she nodded towards the door) "will see you in a second."

"Thank you," Kesso replied, feeling he could kiss her, like a sister. Once more his

gay, light mood had returned. He went over to the window and stood there, hands clasped behind his back.

The perfume of eucalyptus and laurel drifted in through the open window. There was the swish of tires against asphalt as motorcars crossed the spacious square before the building. Farther away, by the seashore, women and children were taking a stroll, fishermen were mending their nets and a boy on a bicycle was describing dizzy circles.

Kesso began to hum a song—very softly, he could barely hear it himself.

"Feeling bored?" asked the girl.

"No," he admitted honestly.

It was the literal truth. He could have spent hours in that room without feeling bored. It was very pleasant to watch such a charming girl at work, he assured her gallantly. But the girl was shrewder than he thought. Kesso was more interested in what awaited him behind the door of that private office—now, wasn't he? And she shook an admonitory finger at him, saying:

"Are all the men in Saken so artful?"

"No, not all."

Both laughed—he loudly and heartily, she discreetly, in a half-suppressed way, nodding her head towards the private office as if to say—it's awkward, they may hear.

"I suppose you've come on important business," said the girl, changing the subject.

"Well—what shall I say . what important business can a simple farmer have. . "

"You're too modest "

Kesso felt flattered.

At that moment the door opened, and two men all but fled from the private office. They sped swiftly through the waiting room without looking at anybody or saying goodbye.

"Got a wigging," the girl whispered. "Go in, please, Comrade . "

"Mirba," Kesso reminded her.

He found himself in a tidy, spacious room. Chairs were ranged along the walls. A writing table in the left-hand corner. Another long table covered with green baize pushed up against it. A stack of newspapers and books on the table. Several telephones on the right.

A man rose to meet the young mountaineer. He was of medium height and wore a black suit, a white shirt and a dazzling blue tie. A

broad face with high cheekbones, a high forehead, wavy hair

All this Kesso took in at a single swift glance as he stepped over the threshold.

"Please come in," the occupant of the office greeted him. "An unusual visitor Splendid! Splendid!"

They shook hands

"Your name's Mirba?"

"Mirba, Comrade!" Kesso responded with military precision

✓ "Why army style? We're civilians," the secretary said smiling. "You're an ex-service-man?"

"Yes."

"Tell me where you've been? And when? What did you do?"

Kesso was taken aback. He had least of all expected to be asked for his reminiscences. He had already drawn from his pocket a sheet of paper with notes on the collective farm plan, the percentage of fulfilment and future prospects. Now he unobtrusively slipped it back again. He suddenly felt ashamed about that paper—the man might think he'd come with a ready-made speech, like a real orator.

"I got my baptism of fire at Rostov. Wounded. Helped take Kiev. Got another scratch there. Been in Poland."

"Didn't you get to Berlin?"

"I was too late. The ninth of May came."

"Anyway, others got there if you didn't. Party member?"

"Since 1943."

The telephone rang. Alexander Ivanovich answered it briefly and turned to Kesso with another question.

"I suppose you haven't seen our town for some time?"

"Five years, not counting one day last autumn when I passed through on my way home from the front."

"I'd be very interested to know, Comrade Mirba. What's your impression of our town?"

"It's grown very beautiful, better than before the war..."

Alexander Ivanovich took his visitor by the arm and led him to a plan hanging on the wall.

"I'll show you how things are," said the secretary, pointing out different places on the plan as he talked. "Ten streets have been

licked into shape This year we're going to tackle these streets, build a public bath on this spot, and, if we can manage it, a cinema. The total expenditure will amount to ..."

Alexander Ivanovich knitted his brows and became lost in thought. Apparently he had recalled something important or been suddenly struck by some doubts. For, having named the figure, he simultaneously picked up the telephone. Calling the Town Soviet, he spoke to somebody about the current year's appropriations and the rulings in this connection.

"Comrade Mirba," he continued, "add another hundred thousand to the sum I mentioned—that's our budget for capital construction and town planning."

Alexander Ivanovich explained all this to him in such detail that one would think he intended asking Kesso for the necessary funds. The mountaineer could not make out why the district committee secretary was going into all this with him. On the one hand it was flattering that he, Kesso, should be initiated into such important affairs, but on the other

—what lay behind this unexpected talk? In Saken there was usually a hidden design behind such preludes, and Kesso was on the *qui vive*....

Alexander Ivanovich went on, pointing to the plan:

"This is a swamp. It ought to be drained.... Here a new school will be opened in a day or two. That's a feather in our cap.... How are you off for a school up there? Decent premises?" he asked suddenly.

Then he began asking in detail about everything—about the collective farm, the school, the Party organization's work, the Village Soviet, the Saken people. Kesso answered him, conscious that his replies did not always satisfy the secretary. At such times the latter would wrinkle his brow, as though some annoying fly had alighted on it.

"The people are just people," Kesso said. "There are good ones and bad ones."

Alexander Ivanovich prodded his chest with a finger, asking with a smile:

"Now you yourself—to which sort do you belong, the bad ones or good ones?"

"Me?" Kesso reddened. "Me? Well, what can I say..."

Alexander Ivanovich smiled and sat down at the table.

"You see, you don't know yourself properly yet. . . Tell me some more about your people"

Kesso mentioned several names, judiciously weighing his words in passing an opinion on his fellow villagers.

"I believe . . ." Alexander Ivanovich tapped the end of his pencil on the table—"I believe there are many more of the good folks. Many more! . . . Well, we can go into that later And now tell me what's brought you here."

The secretary looked at him as though he knew the answer. There was a shrewd twinkle in his black eyes, such as many have in Saken too

"It's a very important matter," Kesso began. "I was struck by an idea" (he nearly said—a crazy idea) "for improving the crop yield in our village."

"The idea's a capital one, Comrade Mirba, that's all I can say An excellent one. You've read the Decree?"

"Decree? What Decree?"

Alexander Ivanovich handed him a printed leaflet.

"Read it. For crop yields, for good crop yields, our Government is going to award decorations, and confer the title of Hero of Socialist Labour. What do you think of that?"

Kesso ran his eye over the Decree. He read the lines referring to maize and beamed.

"Splendid!" he cried, bringing his fist down on the table. Then recollected himself and apologized.

Alexander Ivanovich examined the mountaineer attentively. He liked the young man's vivacious, open countenance, his strong hands which he had a trick of balling into fists as though gathering up all his will power into them.

"I didn't know anything about the Decree, Alexander Ivanovich. . . . A hundred poods per hectare has always been considered a miracle in Saken. That's no good!"

"No good at all, Comrade Mirba, I quite agree with you!"

"Well, and so we've decided, Comrade Secretary, to tackle the job in a different way. . . ."

"How, exactly?" Alexander Ivanovich settled himself more comfortably in his chair and prepared to listen to Kesso

"First of all, to plough properly and not just scratch the surface To plough twice, to harrow well and hunt the weeds out like wolves."

"Yes . . . yes," Alexander Ivanovich nodded his approval, tracing something with his pencil on a piece of paper "That's right Proper cultivation of the soil means a triple crop "

Kesso, thus encouraged, grew emboldened and laid his fists on the table.

"That's it—cultivation—proper cultivation. But that's not all. There's more to it We have a cliff up there And it's something of a cliff, Comrade Secretary, let me tell you. In a word—fertilizer, phosphorite "

Alexander Ivanovich looked up in astonishment. "What—phosphorite?"

"Exactly. If we used that phosphorite as a fertilizer, it ought to do a lot for us. Double the yield once again " Then, as though apologizing for his self-confidence, he continued:

"I know a little about agronomy, I passed a course of training I—just a minute ."

Kesso ran out of the office and returned with the precious bag. He undid it, lifted it up onto a chair and drew out a handful of greyish soil.

"There it is," said Kesso solemnly. "I crushed it with a hammer and brought it here to be examined."

Kesso expounded his plans, carefully watching how the secretary took them. Alexander Ivanovich listened without interrupting. He took a pinch of the dust, sniffed it for some reason and without saying a word went to the telephone. He stopped beside it and turned to Kesso before removing the receiver.

"Is it a big cliff?"

"Enormous. Cartloads of it!"

"Do you know that we've been searching high and low for phosphorite? We ship down superphosphate from thousands of miles away! If we had a cheap supply on the spot—what more could we ask?" He went back to the bag. "Phosphorite—that's plain. What about quality?" and Alexander Ivanovich looked enquiringly at Kesso.

"I don't know, Alexander Ivanovich, I can't answer for the quality."

"Too bad." (Kesso's heart sank.) "But if it's real phosphorite you're in luck... Of course, crushing it won't be like cracking sunflower seeds. You'll need crushing mills and motors... Never mind, there won't be any hindrance there."

Alexander Ivanovich lifted the receiver with an abrupt movement.

"Hello!" he said. "Put me through to the chairman of the district executive committee, and the agricultural department, and then . . . No, that'll do for the present. . . . Yes . . . Hello! I say, can you come here right away? An interesting business. Very well. Yes . . . Hello? Who's that on the line? Listen, I've got a man here from Saken who wants to see you. I'm not joking. . . . Will you come over? I'll expect you in five minutes. Good."

He pressed a button and said to the girl who entered:

"Ask the secretaries in here."

Alexander Ivanovich paced up and down the office deep in thought.

"Is that what brought you to town, Comrade Mirba?" he pointed to the bag.

"Yes."

"And what do your people think about it?"

"They've got doubts, Alexander Ivanovich."

"But, in general, do they support you?"

"Of course, to the last man," Kesso lied

"I fancy that not everyone's so eager about it," the secretary remarked with a shrewd glance at Kesso "Take that Decree with you when you go back to Saken and a thing or two more Let 'em read it"

The secretaries began to arrive, noisily greeting Alexander Ivanovich and each other

"What is it, a bureau meeting?" somebody asked, puzzled.

Alexander Ivanovich burst into a hearty laugh.

"Nearly," he said "Please come over here, all of you, and take a look at this bag. But first of all let me introduce Comrade Mirba from Saken."

The word "Saken" created a sensation

"Oh! You're early in town this year"

"From Saken? How did you get here?"

Kesso shook the proffered hands.

"Is the road open, then?"

"I travelled on my own back," Kesso answered jocularly.

"Not much inn, that!" somebody observed.

"I should say not!"

An hour later Kesso took his leave of Alexander Ivanovich.

"Comrade Mirba," the secretary had said at parting, "we approve your project. It looks as though Saken's in luck. Tomorrow or the day after we'll get the results of the analysis. But I see you're not relying only on your discovery. Quite right. The cliff will come in its own turn and its own time. Suppose the analysis is favourable. You heard?—You'll need a mill brought up there, an engine, fuel. That's no simple job. But for the present your job's the ploughing. Keep in closer touch with the Party organization and everything'll go well." (Alexander Ivanovich made a brief pause.) "We Bolsheviks are modest people, we don't like praising each other, but, all the same, you're a splendid lad! Get me? Some people may think that you live out there shut off from everybody. They're wrong! The whole country's with you. You're not alone,

The Bolshevik spirit penetrates everywhere, over all mountains, passes and rivers. Look here," and Alexander Ivanovich led the mountaineer to the map "Here's the Soviet Union A vast, strong world power And you are part of it Live and work just as you would live and work in Moscow, close to Stalin. Do you get me?"

Alexander Ivanovich spoke quietly, deliberately He was unhurried in his movements, and that made him seem a bit dry. But if there was no great temperament in the secretary's outward manner, his every word was filled with such earnestness and sincere interest that Kesso, listening, felt as though he were growing wings

"Bear in mind, Comrade Mirba, the harvest is everything Fight for it tooth and nail. Remember that Moscow counts your grains too Yes, yes! Nobody forgets you. Understand? This summer, now, we're starting an airline to Saken . By the way, someone did fly to you before the war, didn't they?"

"Yes, once . . ."

'Airline, though, is too grand a word! It'll be U-2's that'll come out to you, once a week

to begin with " And with a sly smile Alexander Ivanovich added. "But in time there may be a real airline What do you think?"

"Certainly an airline, Alexander Ivanovich "

"Well, Comrade Mirba, tomorrow or the day after you'll know the results of the analysis Come and see me then . . By the way, I'd like to send you home by air. In five or six days' time that could be arranged "

"But I'm in a hurry Sowing time's near."

"Anyway, drop in, we'll see about that. Goodbye "

Kesso felt like a man who has come away from a good feast, his head spinning but himself not drunk, when everything about him is whirling round and round, but his legs are steady, when the world glows with all the colours of the rainbow, and it is no dream but absolute reality!

25

In Saken life ran its usual course.

Kesso's team, under the vigilant eye of Yekup, completed the ploughing. Yekup was awaiting his son's return with impatience. In

general, things were going much better in the Bright Ray Collective Farm than the previous year.

But troubles were not altogether lacking. The floodwaters had washed away the dam of Gudal's electric station and the light went out for a long time.

Old Shaangen fell seriously ill. The doctor feared for his life and visited the old man every evening.

Nikuala was doing well at his hunting and disappeared in the forest for days on end. He had prevailed upon Konstantin to organize a special team of hunters.

"After all, the profits will go to the collective farm," he had argued. "And later on we might perhaps extend the business."

The First of May was approaching. Konstantin and Mushag laid plans for celebrating the holiday. At the forcing house a May Day gift was being prepared for the farm—fifty thousand seedlings over plan. Kama and Nina, the best workers there, were to receive bonuses.

Adamur was flourishing. In bad weather the shop's trade (meaning that of the lean-to)

brought in a considerable sum As for Rashit. . . oh, Rashit was not interested in the holiday, he had his own concerns

That unwritten law, the masculine code of honour, demanded decisive action from the chivalrous champion of old customs. Rashit felt that it was time to change from words to action if he did not want to become a laughing stock among his friends.

And so, the day and the hour were appointed

The conspirators were to meet at Marten's Lair According to Sakenian tradition the spot was the erstwhile abode of wood gobhins Anton sat on a stump smoking, awaiting his confederates In the deepening twilight he looked like one of the evil sprits that had once haunted the spot.

"You've come?" he wheezed "I was beginning to fear you'd changed your mind "

The lanky one and Anton dived into the thicket, and the amorous Rashit took Anton's place on the stump, close beside the path He was wearing a new woollen shirt, cavalryman's

leather-reinforced breeches and a sheepskin coat. His boots, as becomes such a dashing fellow, squeaked, and on his head was a tall Ashakian hat borrowed from Adamur. He sat there on the stump, his thoughts running forward along the winding path leading to the collective farm hotbeds. And down that path, towards those dark thoughts, came Kama. At the bend in the path she said goodbye to Nina and went on alone towards her home.

Fearing to startle the girl, Rashit walked along to meet her, humming a song.

Kama was not particularly surprised to see Rashit. She greeted him and wanted to continue on her way, but he stood in her path.

"I've been waiting here to see you home," he said.

"Thank you."

He squeezed her arm above the elbow and continued, gritting his teeth:

"Don't you think you've tormented me long enough? . Yes, yes. . . I feel, Kama, that love has risen to here. . . ." (He touched his Adam's apple) "Don't laugh. There's a limit to everything."

She answered jestingly, but Rashit was evidently in no mood for jokes

The talk took an ugly turn Rashit's tone became truculent and threatening Though the girl was frightened she tried to conceal it and keep up the conversation in a jocular vein

Rashit lost all patience

"You're going to marry me, and that's all there is to it!" he shouted angrily

"That will never be!"

He gave one short, sharp whistle and seized her without more ado Anton and Yenik sprang up seemingly from nowhere and in the twinkling of an eye threw a cloak over the girl and flung her unceremoniously across a horse. And so—Kama was abducted!

It should be noted that this method of abduction was shorn entirely of real romance. Now judge for yourself. Kama did not swoon away, nor did the cavaliers evince a tender forethought for the maiden's comfort when they put her across the horse And the steed for its part did not fly like the wind with its precious burden. No, it ambled along at a walking pace, barely managing to keep to the path. And to

he jolted on a horse's neck like a sack is a most distressing experience.

The kidnapper himself was no less uncomfortable than his victim. His hands were stiff, his feet numb and his neck almost twisted off. No, Rashit did not experience a fraction of that bliss which, if one is to believe the old romances, fills the heart of the successful abductor

Two hours later, Kama was sitting on a bench in a strange house. Silence reigned in the room, but men's voices could be heard through the thin wooden partition. The girl was hardly able to lift her head. Her whole body ached, as though she had been beaten with clubs. Nevertheless, she was ready to scratch out the eyes of anybody who dared to approach her.

The door creaked, and an old woman appeared carrying a plate.

'My daughter,' she said kindly "Don't be alarmed. Don't upset yourself. Bow your head to the inevitable. Such is the fate of us women. We are all carried away sooner or later.

First by them" (she pointed to the partition) "and then by death the inexorable." The crone shuddered and her crooked nose twitched. She moved her dry lips with difficulty. Her eyes, remarkably bright for one of her years, were deep-set in their sockets.

Kama got up from the bench. Her legs barely supported her. Nevertheless, the old woman judiciously stepped back.

"Aren't you ashamed, old woman, to be mixed up in a thing like this? Helping fools in their dirty work?" Kama flung at her angrily. "Have you asked me if I want to marry that cutthroat?"

The crone flung up her hands.

"Why, my daughter . . . He said he was coming with his wife. How was I to know? We're but human beings, my dear—you're welcome!"

Kama sat down by the fireplace where wood was smouldering.

"It's cold," she said. "The fire needs stirring up."

"My daughter," mumbled the crone, "let me . . ."

"I'll manage myself. And you, Grandmother,

if it's not too much trouble, you might give me something to eat. I'm hungry. . . But where are those madmen?"

"In the kitchen," the old woman answered, embarrassed

"Wait a minute!" Kama took an ancient flintlock down from the wall "Does this shoot?"

"Goodness gracious, no, dearie, it's been silent for half a century."

"That doesn't matter, it'll do for a club And don't you give me away—tell them it's loaded "

The old woman nodded submissively and hobbled to the door

"And that—abductor—send him to me," Kama called after her. She was furious And heaven preserve us from a Saken woman when she's enraged .

Kama stretched her legs and examined the old flintlock That weapon, chased in silver, pleased her greatly. She raised the gun and took aim at the door handle.

At that moment the door opened and Rashit appeared on the threshold—pale and agitated. Seeing the gun in the girl's hands, he fell back.

"Why, you—what are you doing?" he stammered, taken aback.

"Nothing," said Kama airily. "Just looking at this gun. A good gun! But where's the mistress got to—I'm hungry."

"What the hell," thought Rashit "Either she's gone crazy or she's decided to make the best of it." And he ran off to hurry the mistress up with the food. He soon returned and sat down modestly in a corner.

"And where's your comrade?"

"Here, in the kitchen."

"Why doesn't he come in? I'd like to have a look at him!"

"Don't bother about him, Kama." He wanted to approach her.

"Not a step nearer. Is that clear?"

Rashit submitted.

"Listen," he said after a moment's silence. "I think you understand everything and can appreciate the state I'm in. My feelings. Love. Frenzy. I've lost all peace."

Kama looked at him with loathing.

"I'd like to know," she said, stamping her foot, "what age we're living in? Is this 1947? Eh? Even in this Godforsaken place, in such

a bear's den as Saken, the whole thing's like a circus show!"

"I've done nothing to shame the customs of our forefathers."

"Oh, you—no!" cried Kama. "It's they that have shamed you, those old customs."

Rashit paced up and down the room, contriving to come closer to the girl.

"Keep your distance!" In an instant the gun was levelled at the fellow's head.

"It doesn't shoot," he said mockingly.

"But the butt's pretty strong!" said Kama brandishing her weapon.

"You're mad," cried Rashit angrily, resuming his seat. "All right, we can play cat and mouse till morning. Only I don't see the sense of it."

"You will, when I tell you to have a horse ready for me at daybreak to take me home."

Rashit fumed. The old woman appeared in the doorway with plates in her hands. She heard Kama's words.

"What?" she cried in surprise. "You'll go away? Alone?"

Kama rose in respect for the other's age.

"Alone, if he hasn't the sense to escort me."

"You'll return to your home?"

"Where else?"

"Think first, Kama. Remember we're now husband and wife in a way."

"How do you make that out?" the girl cried indignantly

"I said—in a way," he repeated. "Since you've spent the night under the same roof with me—I think that will be enough for Saken."

"And I don't," Kama retorted. "But what a blackguard you are!"

"I swear," Rashit began. But she indignantly turned away from him.

"The first to punish you will be Kesso," he said vindictively

"Kesso?"

"Ah, daughter," interposed the old woman as she placed the dishes on a small table. "You don't know what men are. Who wants another man's leavings?"

Kama straightened up proudly and threw her head back defiantly. The old woman involuntarily admired her—the slits of her eyes narrowed down to a reddish line.

"Well, if Kesso turns out to be the least bit like you I'll be the one to spurn him. I'll get along without him!"

The old woman went up to the girl, put her arm round her waist and kissed her (Kama felt as though a stone had touched her cheek)

Rashit pulled his hat down over his brows and went out, saying carelessly.

"All right. We'll see what tune you'll sing in the morning."

His insolence angered the old woman

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Rashit! I don't like it when guests behave rudely in my house. Get along with you into the kitchen and go to sleep—we'll stay here. Better you had not attempted this man's job "

Rashit, lying on the bunk and smoking a cigarette (he was very, very tired), still hoped for some change in Kama's attitude.

When dawn broke, however, and Rashit peeped into the room where the two were, he found Kama and the crone engaged in friendly conversation.

And so ended the inglorious escapade.

On a bright April day, when the world basked in the caressing rays of the spring sun, an important event took place in Saken

Suddenly a spot appeared in the sky, growing larger and larger until it finally revealed itself as an aeroplane. It circled once or twice over the village and landed on Badger's Mead. People came running up to Badger's Mead from all sides and stood around the plane as if it were a guest shy to cross the threshold

A young man dressed from head to foot in leather stepped out onto the wing. He leapt down and fell into the embraces of the crowd—they almost squeezed the breath out of him. He took off his goggles and looked about

"So this is Saken?" he asked.

"Yes," he was told, "the real, genuine Saken"

"I guess I'm the first air visitor here?" said the pilot.

"No," came the reply, "you're wrong. You're a bit too late. We had visitors like you before the war."

The Alan brothers, Daud and Damei, looked sort of dissatisfied.

"Seven years ago," said Daud, "a man came out on just the same kind of machine. Yes—the same canvas wings, the same plywood. Damn it, I thought after the war there'd be better birds than this. Eh?"

The auman looked a little disconcerted.

"What's right is right," he said apologetically. "It's not what you might call the latest model, but it's airworthy. Never let you down, especially in the mountains. But soon, very soon, there'll be other planes coming out here. Fast machines, very elegant and comfortable—I saw them on our aerodrome!"

The pilot told them his impressions coming down. Up there, it seemed, everything was all whiteness, the clouds beneath you were like cotton wool and the mountains were no bigger than the furrows on a ploughed field.

"And the air route out here's as bad as the ground trail," he said. "It's like bumping over potholes—you get that tossed about."

The auman rummaged in his pocket and brought out a letter. He read the address and asked:

"Where's Kesso Mirba?"

"He's in town," he was told.

"No," the man replied. "He left for home five days ago."

"In that case, he ought to be here any minute now!"

Meanwhile people still crowded about the plane. Shaangeri prowled round it as though it were a gunpowder barrel. Gudal decided to enlighten the old man. He led Shaangeri to the nose of the machine and said:

"This is the engine. It drives the propeller. . . . It's a famous plane—a U-2."

"I see, my son, I see," said Shaangeri wonderingly. "A good one, I suppose?"

"Not bad. Look at the wings—two pairs. Even an eagle has only one pair!"

He extolled the machine as though he were selling it at a fair. He led the old man now to the tail, now to the propeller, and then back again to the tail. A dozen or so peasants followed close on his heels. Each tried to elbow his way closer to hear what Gudal was saying. And Gudal, to the amazement of his listeners, rattled off such a string of technicalities that one would think he had built that flying

machine with his own hands. When he had heard Gudal out, the old man asked:

"So the thing flies?"

Gudal's eloquence, then, had all been wasted—it seemed he would have to start again from the beginning. Gudal complained of a sore throat

"Let's call Simon," somebody suggested.

"That's right!" others caught up "Simon's an ex-serviceman, he'll trot it all out"

"Hey, Simon, come down off that wing!"

The crowd made way. Simon stepped forward. He was a team leader on the collective farm, a sharp young fellow who had lost three fingers of his left hand at the front. Had he been less agile and resourceful, he would have left his head there too—for he had been in many a tight corner. He enquired what they wanted of him.

"We want you to explain the hows and whys of it all"

"What's there to explain? . Who doesn't know those hedgehoppers!" and he pulled a contemptuous face.

"D'you remember, Simon," said a voice from the crowd, "how we used to toss our

caps at 'em, they flew so low. Hedgehoppers, all right!"

Simon leaned his shoulder against the side of the machine. He tapped it and said significantly.

"Plywood. And there, nearer the tail, canvas.... A fighter or a dive bomber, now, that's a different pair of shoes. There, brother, you've got to hold your head tight or it'll be torn off by the speed ..."

Simon was being altogether too unflattering about the winged guest. This distressed Shaangeri. Whatever you might think about it, still it was a guest.

"My son," he said, "don't you think that your words may offend somebody?" Shaangeri eyed the presumptuous young man as a prophet might look at some blasphemer. "That is not good, my son. You are young yet .."

Shaangeri could not make out why people (he called them children) in Saken had become so cheeky and cocksure. The town light to them was a mere nothing, and an aeroplane that could fly above the clouds just a commonplace thing. The old man's noblest

feelings were wounded, for he considered this a red-letter day in his life (he had said the same to Gudal when he inspected the electric station).

"Yes," he mumbled gloomily "The people have changed. . . You mustn't speak that way of a guest. It's against the custom." Aggrieved, he left the crowd and sat down a little way off, where he could better see the silvery machine.

The young folks enjoyed a private joke at the old man's expense. But the headmaster Mushag took his part.

"You shouldn't have offended the old man," he said. "True, I wasn't at the front myself, but I read all the papers carefully, never missed one. This U-2 is probably not much of a machine to look at, but it did excellent service. It was second to none when it came to bombing the enemy front lines by night, say, or keeping contact with the partisans."

The Sakenians were delighted to hear that it was after all such a game plane that had been sent out to them, a famous machine that had flown by night, and done bombing, and

helped the partisans. They went round it once more, feeling it all over from nose to tail

Everybody was so taken up with the aeroplane that Kesso's appearance in the meadow was not noticed. Travel-worn and unshaven, he greeted his fellow villagers and evinced no surprise at the presence of the winged messenger.

"Did you bring the machinery?" he asked

They pointed out to him some machine parts that had meanwhile been unloaded from the plane

"Good," said Kesso "They'll bring some more over soon I made the journey in five days, but this plane probably did it in an hour "

27

Even in unusually warm weather April evenings in the mountains are rather cool. If the house you live in is situated high up, you will, on going out onto the porch, see a ridge of snowy peaks bathed in bluish moonlight The breeze coming from these mountains chills in

its passage over the snowy heights, and that accounts for the coolness

You begin to shiver at the mere sight of those snow-clad crests towering against the greenish darkness of the night. They stand silent, these rocky buttresses, frozen for eternity under their white caps. And beneath them is nothing but a yawning void, black as the cloak of a mountaineer. And involuntarily you are drawn to the warm flames of the hearth burning in the depths of the kitchen.

In Yekup's house there was company. The guests were drawn up around the hearth. Yekup lay on the bunk. Kesso sat a little way off. Nina was busy in a corner sieving flour. Konstantin was listening to Kesso's story, silently stirring the ashes with a piece of charred wood. Anton lurked in the shadows, behind Gudal's back. Every now and then Kesso's eye tried to snatch him out of his concealment.

Kesso was relating in detail the story of his journey (Saken people love details). His speech teemed with interjections, exclamations and the most flattering epithets when he related

how the secretary had received him, and the support he had promised him.

‘ Well, so they gave you a good welcome,’ said Konstantin

Kesso was silent for a moment, as though recalling something

“Welcomed me splendidly, no other word for it!” he continued, lowering his voice. “Alexander Ivanovich called a meeting. Discussed it all. Made tests. They’re very keen on that cliff of ours. They advised me what to do and how to set about it and gave me these rulings—they’re from Moscow, from the Kremlin.”

He smoothed out the printed sheet on his knee, and took a pamphlet out of his side pocket

‘ This is about the February plenum of the Central Committee, and a Decree . . .’

“Let’s read it,” said Konstantin, addressing the company

Gudal drew his chair up to Kesso and looked at the paper over his shoulder.

“De-cree,” he whispered

There was hushed silence. The only sound was the crackling of the logs, and the hissing

of the moisture in them, being expelled by the all-powerful flames

Yekup leaned on his stick. The flames illumined his face, darkened by winds and sun. His hood had slipped to the back of his head.

Gudal followed the reading tensely. He hung over the printed word like a child thrilled by an exciting story.

Anton cautiously rubbed his inflamed eyes. His cough choked him, but he tried to stifle it, "drive it into his stomach," as they say in Saken.

Konstantin sat with legs wide apart, his head propped in his hand, deeply lost in thought.

Nina stopped sieving the flour and sat down on the edge of the bench.

The brothers Damei and Daud Alan sat shoulder to shoulder, warming their hands over the fire, shivering with pleasure.

The measured voice of the team leader rang clear in the kitchen. Everybody hung on his lips, fearful of losing a word. One can only regret that there was no photographer present to take a picture of those Saken farmers reading the Decree from the Kremlin....

May it pass down the ages, that wonderful hour, filled with concentration and grandeur. May those words never fade that inspired millions of peasants to fervid labour for the good and prosperity of their country and their people! My countrymen it was, reading that Decree, and their hearts opened out eagerly to the Soviet Government's solicitude and forethought for the people, for the peasants, for the happiness of a country that had undergone the horrors of a savage invasion, had completely routed the enemy and was now once more marching confidently to its goal. That was how the Decree was understood throughout our vast and mighty country, and that was how it was understood in Saken ..

Yekup cried

"This is a great thing, a very great thing, my friends ..."

Kesso interrupted him:

"We here in Saken have been thinking only of ourselves, but Stalin has spoken to the whole world "

"Aye, aye, that's true," the old man agreed.

Kesso, his reading finished, laid the paper aside.

"Yes," he said, "amazing things, I would say. Down there in the lowlands they're getting a thousand poods per hectare.... If we could only manage half of that!"

"Greedy," laughed Gudal

"Kesso," said Konstantin, "so we're going to tackle the maize, I take it?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, then, tell us all about it. It's interesting for all of us."

"Very well" Kesso lighted a town cigarette "Here's the plan for our team We're taking on three hectares ourselves And we're going to make 'em give us a yield of five hundred I pledge my word!"

The Alan brothers drew a loud breath Anton cleared his throat Gudal—for joy, I suppose—began poking the fire A swarm of golden sparks shot up from the hearth

"The principal thing, Comrades," Kesso continued, screwing up his eyes against the bright flames—"and Alexander Ivanovich impressed it on me very strongly—the principal thing's the ploughing, harrowing and weeding Everything strictly on time, according to the rules. And as for that cliff of ours—it's the

real thing. It's called phosphorite. People pay good money for it, bring it from the ends of the earth, and we've got it here, right under our noses. We're going to get a crushing mill, an engine, and fuel too. We'll start pulverizing it, sprinkle the soil with it—and you'll see what'll happen! I felt as though a load had fallen off my shoulders when I saw the analysis. I told Alexander Ivanovich—what if the cliff had let me down—I'd have been on the rocks then. But he just laughed. . . 'You fellows in Saken wouldn't be on the rocks, cliff or no cliff,' he said, 'you didn't run things so badly before the war!'

'Quite right,' Gudal agreed.

"But everything has turned out well. We're going to work that phosphorite—it'll cost us next to nothing. And they're going to build a road here—then we'll help other collective farms. Why not? . . . But for the present—for the present we need help, Konstantin."

'We'll bring up the question at a meeting,' said Konstantin. "That's the first thing. We'll discuss it with the collective farm board—that's the second. It's a matter that concerns everybody. Isn't that so?"

"Nobody has faith in Nikuala," said Damei.
"You know what he is "

"By the way, Konstantin . . ." Kesso began, and then broke off "But we can go into that afterwards . . . It's about Nikuala . . . In town they've got a definite opinion of him " He repeated. "a definite opinion "

" I see, Kesso " Konstantin coughed to indicate that he had understood what Kesso was hinting at. And Kesso had hinted at the necessity of putting someone more energetic and efficient in Nikuala's place

Kesso went on with an air of preoccupation.

"The cliff'll have to be crushed to powder
And then we'll fertilize the land with that powder. All science guarantees a good crop "

Damei pulled his moustache and coughed importantly.

' A fine project, I say," he observed "Sure as I live, we won't grudge any effort. Like inventing gunpowder. Eh? We can thank the people in town for giving us a helping hand "

Yekup tossed about on his bunk, wheezing and groaning, turning first his right side to the fire, then his left.

'We old 'uns will see what you youngsters make of it," he said. "We're out of the running."

"No, we're not," said Anton shamefacedly, coughing, "we've all got to pull—isn't that right?"

Kesso darted a keen look in his direction—it was like the sweep of a cutting scythe. Anton winced. "He knows everything, they've told him," he thought to himself, cursing Rashit in his heart.

"We'll discuss your report tomorrow, Kesso, at the Party meeting," said Konstantin. "We'll read out the Decree and the decision. The cliff's a sure thing, brother, that's clear. We'll put people on the job and furnish carts. The Village Soviet will help. . ."

Konstantin got up

"Where are you going?" Yekup asked in surprise. 'Come on, daughter, lay the table!'"

When the master of the house utters these words, addressed to the females of the family, and the guests settle themselves back in their places, there usually follows a brief lull in the conversation. It is then the duty of the host to entertain his guests. And Yekup, casting

about in his mind for a new topic of conversation, repeated several times the one word "yes."

Assistance came from an unexpected quarter.

"Well, Kesso," said Damei, "what's new in the world? What are people talking about? Calmed down, I hope?"

"Depends who," said Kesso vaguely. "But in general, not quite."

Yekup broke in.

"Listen, when our neighbours Gadaia and Gana quarrelled and then made up at last, they didn't say good day to each other for six months afterwards—got out of the way of it, they said. And mind you, these were fellow villagers. And you want the world to settle down peacefully all at once!"

"They're said to have new bombs," said Daud, "they think the world of 'em."

Kesso smiled.

"Our country's as impregnable as Saken! But out there in Indonesia things are pretty rotten," he said suddenly. "They're betraying the republic."

This news was deplored.

"Indonesia, you say," asked Damei.
'What's that, a town or a country?'

"A country."

"Indonesia, eh?" Damei pursued "And who's betraying it? "

"The same people as usual," said Kesso.
"America and the like "

"Well, and how about us?" enquired Yekup.

"The Soviet Union, you mean? We're for Indonesia."

'Is that so?' Yekup leapt to his feet.
"Well, then, you bark my words—this here America won't get anywhere in Indonesia. You'll see!"

Yekup surveyed his guests triumphantly. He was glad to be able to express an opinion on such important matters.

Kesso kept trying to catch Anton's eye, but the latter stubbornly avoided his glance. "You blackguard!" thought Kesso and turned away from Anton in disgust.

"But all the same," said Daud, "I can't understand why they're talking about war again?"

"Can't you?" Konstantin twisted his body

right round to face him 'It's they've started that talk, the imperialists. Our Soviet Government sticks in their throats."

Silence Everything was quiet. And out of that silence Daud—a huge, thickset man—said slowly and impressively:

"They don't like our Soviet Government? So much the worse for them!"

At this moment the glasses of wine arrived, and so opportunely, that all cried out in one voice:

"Here's to the Soviet Government!"

You will understand, reader, the simple Saken folk, who raise their glasses to their government before drinking the health of their families—their fathers and mothers Think, and judge for yourself: everything these peasants have—freedom, a life of security, toil in common, a feeling of pride in their country, the great sensation of present happiness and confidence in the future—all this was given them by the Soviet Government. How could they then not prize it, how could they not love it? To that government they pay the greatest, the highest honour, for without it there would be no real life!

The guests sat on long into the early hours of morning, and when they came out into the courtyard, an immense moon the size of a cartwheel hung over their heads. It was a moon to gladden the hearts of any company. Somewhere in the bushes an invisible little bird suddenly broke into song. It seemed very strange—such a vast world and such a tiny voice, yet so audible in that world.

"Hush!" said Kesso, "it's singing."

Hosts and guests stood listening to the song of the bird, while the moon bathed the earth in a flood of brilliant light . .

Kesso, fatigued with the journey, the conversation and his own thoughts, was preparing to go to bed.

On the threshold of his room he saw his sister. She seemed to be upset. He patted her on the shoulder.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"She's not to blame," she burst out quickly. "I know all about it."

Kesso sat down on the bed and, stretching, said indifferently:

"What do you know? Girls aren't abducted if they don't want to be. What d'you call that, anyway!" he ejaculated angrily. "Letting herself be abducted! And by whom?"

Nina stood firm, determined not to give way

"She's been crying a lot," said Nina, looking sternly at her brother. "She's still crying. Don't laugh. She's a good girl. It's all Rashit's fault, no wonder he's run away. ."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to talk to her."

"Oh, with pleasure."

"Don't make a joke of it. I'm serious."

"And you think I'm not?"

"And you call yourself a man!" she continued. "You tell other people off for being backward, but what are you yourself, eh?"

He had not expected this dressing down from his sister, whom he was accustomed to regard as a child.

"Well, go on," he said, laughing

"I'm not saying another thing," Nina pouted. "Do you think Kama can't find her own road? Think she'll be lost without you? Oh no, my dear boy! I know. If you let her go, she'll never come back! Times have changed!"

"I see, I see "

' If one scoundrel's insulted a girl, you think another ought to do the same? "

"Another scoundrel? "

"No, another man, that is, if he's got a drop of decency in him ' "

"I don't know " Kesso was actually enjoying her angry tirade "So that's my little sister!" he was thinking, involuntarily admiring her

Nina went into the other room, then came back again, and without crossing the threshold, said

"We're not what we used to be! Not chickens, whose necks you can wring as easy as winking!" With that she went out, slamming the door.

Kesso fell asleep with the feeling that the main thing for which he had gone to town had been satisfactorily settled But an unpleasant thought kept worrying him, marring his joy

"Damn that Rashit!" he ground out through his teeth, turning to the dark chestnut wall, and pulled the blanket over his head

A month ago it had not been so pleasant by the spring as it was now. The weather was much warmer, and the mirrorlike surface of the water was very tempting. Soon this spring would become the favourite spot of all who sought coolness, all in whom too hot a heart was beating. And in the moonlit June evenings those green moss-grown rocks would witness many a shy whisper, many a confession of love.

Today was Sunday. Kesso and Kama sat on the stones facing each other. She wore a white silk frock, and a blue kerchief on her head. She also wore her best shoes and expensive stockings with embroidered clocks (this hose is greatly admired in Saken). She was as pretty a sight as one might wish to see! Her plaits—two thick, black braids—were drawn forward over her shoulders.

Kama was relating the details of her "abduction." Oh, that night she had shown what a Saken girl was made of!

Kesso was absently tracing figures on the sand.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"Yes, that's all."

An oppressive silence fell. Then she said in a choked voice.

"I'm going away Very soon . "

He turned to her swiftly. He saw her sad eyes looking at him as though through a dimmed glass. His first impulse was to comfort her, to caress her. "Damn it," the thought flashed through his mind, "she ought to understand that I'm not Rashit." No, Kama was a good girl, a very good girl. But he wanted to hear what else she had to say.

"Where do you intend to go, Kama?"

"To town."

He stared at her blankly.

"Can't I go too? Do you think you're the only one who can do it? I'm going to study."

The thought suddenly thrilled her, and, staring out into the blue Saken valley, she said, as though making a vow:

"I shall go away and study. There are schools everywhere, thank heaven. People will help me. I'm not afraid of anything. . . . Only I'd like to come back here in three years and have a look at you all—" and breaking into tears, she ran away. She flew up the

steep path, stumbled and again sped on. Now she was already at the top. Another second and she had plunged into the bushes.

Kesso jumped up. . .

But it was too late to overtake her. Her white frock was fluttering high up!

Kesso was left alone, alone with his thoughts and the whole wide world. The young mountaineer sat on the same boulder, by the same spring as a month before. And over his head was the merry spring sky. Guagua and Klych were veiled in a rolling mist as though someone had lighted fires with damp sticks on their summits. From below came the rumble of the Saken. On the right lay Silver Meadow, on the left Nut Gully and Miamba. A wreath of smoke curled over nearly every cottage in Saken. And if the snow-capped mountains so brilliantly thrown against the deep blue sky could have moved, they would have formed a very merry dance in a ring. . .

Kesso rose. He could see the tracks of small feet on the fine sand, and with sure confidence he planted his own tracks beside them—other, larger ones, visible from afar. . .

April was drawing to a close. Hot days had set in. Dust lay on the roads. And as in the height of summer, the wind swept it up and whirled it off somewhere

The foliage had come out, filled with sap. Scratch any tree trunk and the moisture would gush forth like a spring from underground.

The air was filled with the incessant and merry song of birds. Cows were lowing on the pastures, and at dawn the cocks crowed vain-gloriously.

From early morning the whole village was out at work. Carts rumbled leisurely along the country lanes, their creaking sounding far and wide

Yes, my friends, I love Saken in the spring, I love it with a special sort of love—maybe because it is in springtime that it seems so young and full of vigour.

It is good to wander about the village on a warm spring day, and still better to go to the river. There everybody can find some pleasant occupation.

I sit by the Saken. At this spot the river arches like a swan's neck.

The bank is high and steep. At its foot are boulders and smaller stones I move my foot—and the earth crumbles and falls.

Beneath me the water swirls furiously, eating away the bank On the opposite side it is calm, the bank is low and sandy. Beyond the yellow beach grows a clump of pines. Nearer to the water are weeping willows And beyond the green forest thickets loom the snowy mountains

Twenty paces away there is a calm backwater

A little boy in a red shirt is fishing He sits patiently holding his rod, every now and then pulling the line out of the water with a swift movement. But the hook is empty, though the bait has disappeared The boy bails his hook again and casts the line

Beside him sits Shaangeri Kanha He seems to have fallen asleep (this is not difficult in the delightful April sunshine). But I am mistaken. He has noticed the sketch I am making. He comes slowly up and stands behind me.

I am putting on the last few touches. The sketch shows the river Saken with its swan-neck bend, with the buildings of the Saken

Soviet and the school in the distance. Still farther—the mountain range and some lovely clouds (these, I must confess, were the chief reason for the sketch). I hear Shaangeri wheezing, feel that he is looking at me very hard. I turn and see his eyes, filled with curiosity.

"My son," says Shaangeri, "you have a very nice cap" (I know that he considers a hat a queer covering for the head) "They say you also have a hood"

"Yes, I have."

"Have you a mountaineer's cloak too, Alexander?"

"Yes, I've bought myself a real Kabardi-man cloak"

"Let me see this" The old man reaches out for my hat. He turns it round and round, then looks inside

"Silk?" he asks, feeling the lining.

"Yes, that's silk"

Taking a deep puff at his pipe, the old man says.

"Good lad! Good lad!... I like your hat, they say this is what learned men wear... So now one of our Saken lads has put it on... Good lad!..."

Next comes my picture. It evidently does not satisfy him, otherwise he would have started with it.

"Very pretty, I should say," he remarks. "But why are there no people in it? You can't do without man. . . . Look, here are willows growing. Man has planted them. There is the school. Man built it. Don't you like men?"

"Who said I don't like them, Shaangeri?"

"Then draw one here," he touches the bank with his finger and it comes away smeared with yellow paint.

I promise to do so, and he goes back to his great-grandson, who has finally succeeded in catching a small fish. The old man strides along with measured tread, and his iron-pointed staff taps sharply on the stones with a tinkling sound. . . .

It is the last day of April. The sun hangs high in the zenith. The heavens are a deep, deep blue (one could get real ultramarine off them!). The verdant soil of Saken is studded with glade-like patches of yellow and brown—this is the ploughland (you could take the soil and mix yourself ochre). The river flows in an endless silver ribbon. I leave my sketch

and gaze at the river—its limpidity fascinates me. . . I think of my Saken friends . . .

A little over a month has passed since that day we first met those two young people—Kesso and Kama—at the spring. A month is not such a long time, but not such a very short one either (A good deal can happen in a month) This April has been no ordinary one for Saken, and I can predict an unusual autumn.

I draw the sketch nearer to me, and on the background of the Saken landscape I can see Kesso. He stands before the cliff, as though wishing to test his strength against it. That young man will not be daunted! Well, maybe the lad exaggerated a bit when he talked about a thousand poods. But even if it's less, it's going to be a staggering yield! . . . I see Konstantin, the slow-moving Konstantin—slow, but sure in all he does. And Gudal? No, he will never lag behind the others. And Smel? I can see him flying off to the town—there's a certain building there, you know, with a sign on the door reading "Electrical Engineering Institute." Kama. . . What about Kama? Would you believe me if I told you that fate had parted her from Kesso? Of course not—and

you would be quite right . . . I also have a feeling that Nina will go far—she's such a wonderful worker. And Rashit? Oh, why grieve about him—he'll turn up in time. . . .

Probably another reason why April has made such an impression on me is the fact that I am a Sakenian myself I don't know. But that confounded Sakenitch that gives the storyteller no peace in the long winter evenings has driven me to pen and ink. . . . And now, gazing at the river, I seem to see the lines of that narrative telling of the unusual beginning of last year's spring in Saken, and of events of which I was an involuntary witness

And so, spring is coming, and Saken lives and thrives!



